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JOAN OF THE ISLAND

JOAN OF THE ISLAND

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CHAPTER I

FLOTSAM FROM THE FOUR WINDS

THE door of the skipper's cabin opened slowly, and the head of a man emerged. There was something sinister in the way he paused and listened. For a few moments he was irresolute. Then he glanced back over his shoulder into the cabin, and a queer, grim little smile flashed over his face. He remained irresolute no longer.

Without a sound he closed the door behind him, and moving stealthily, made his way to the deck, where he walked in the direction of the after wheel-house.

Only the soft swish of the water as it rippled along the sides of the steamer, and the steady *thud thud* of the propeller. A fitful moon occasionally glared down on a dead calm sea. Up on the bridge of the *Four Winds* a Kanaka helmsman mechanically kept her sou'east-by-south, and wondered vaguely about a little brown baby that ought to be able to swim by now. The officer on watch was

leaning in a corner of the bridge in his shirt sleeves, sucking an empty pipe, with two more hours of monotony to kill before he could turn in. A thousand flying fish shot up near the vessel's prow, glittered in the moon beams for a space, and sank back into the depths. Astern a lone gull sailed steadily over the wake.

The man who had come from the skipper's cabin paused when he reached a small boat which hung in-board on its davits. With fingers that had suddenly become strangely awkward he started to loosen one of the ropes. The block squeaked as a few inches of manila ran through it, and the man muttered a curse. The night was too still. He glanced over his shoulder apprehensively and scowled. It would be impossible to get the boat overboard, however careful he might be, without fetching half the crew tumbling aft to ascertain what was wrong.

He thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets, winced, and drew one hand out again. Then he fumbled in the boat in the darkness until he fished out a folded cork life-belt. This he laid on the deck. Without further delay he started to unlace his shoes, but his quick ear caught foot-falls.

Like lightning he whipped up the life-belt and moved toward the after rail. There he halted long enough to make sure the steps were coming nearer, and then he lifted one long leg over the rail. Be-

neath, the water, churned to creamy whiteness by the propeller, was gleaming with phosphorus. The screw would cleave him in half if he fouled it. A man needed nerves of iron to drop into that death trap, and his nerves were none too steady at the moment. Only a fraction of a second he hesitated, and then, gripping the life-belt firmly, he slid down into the boiling wake of the *Four Winds*.

It seemed an eternity before the swirling water ceased to spin him round beneath the surface, but even while his lungs felt as though they were bursting for one good breath of sweet air, his chief thought was that the propeller had missed him. When at last, with a mighty effort, he raised his mouth above the foam-flecked surface and gasped, the lights of the *Four Winds* were dwindling in the distance. He could hear the steady *thud thud thud* of the screw, which was driving the ship further away every second, but otherwise everywhere there was deathly stillness.

He was alone with the stars in the middle of the Sulu Sea.

For a few moments the man lay in the water, supported by the life-belt in his arms, watching the disappearance of the steamer, as though reluctant to begin life anew in his peculiar circumstances until the tramp had gone. Soon she was a mile away, and her engines were running as regularly as ever. There was small chance of the vessel stopping now,

and the man gave a grunt of satisfaction. He reached down to one shoe, unlaced it, and kicked it off. The thing was sinking in about a mile of water, he reflected, as he tackled the other shoe. His socks went next, but then he stopped undressing. He now only had on thin trousers and a shirt, neither of which would counterbalance the buoyancy of the life-belt which he opened out and fastened round his waist. For the present he was not physically uncomfortable. The water was warm — almost tepid — and though he moved his arms and legs slowly as a swimmer mechanically does in water, it needed no exertion to keep afloat.

He wondered vaguely what would happen. Of course there were the sharks. There are always plenty of them in the Sulu Sea, but they are not all man-eaters. A shiver crept down his spine, and then he banished the thought of them from his mind. If they came it would soon be over at any rate; but he hoped they would not come.

Presently he turned over and lay on his back, staring up at the stars. It was horribly quiet. He had no idea that such stillness could be. Not a quiver stirred the glassy surface. It was eerie.

From where he lay, with eyes a few inches above the water, the steamer was now only a dot on the horizon. He wondered who would go into the captain's cabin first and find — it. Probably Carson, the second mate, when nobody relieved him on the

bridge. Carson might get a shock but he wouldn't be particularly sorry. A brute like Captain Murdock was better out of the way anyhow, the man in the water reflected. There was no remorse in his heart. He had never killed anyone before, and he sincerely hoped he never would again. Probably he was not to get the chance. But it wasn't murder — not murder in his eyes, that is. Of course nobody on board would believe it. Nor would anyone in any civilized court of law, in face of the evidence. He and Captain Murdock had been at daggers drawn for months. It was just natural antagonism such as springs up between natures which grate on one another. Murdock was a bully, with the temper of a fiend and the manners of a pig. Moreover he was part owner of the *Four Winds*, which fact he never forgot, and he took advantage of it to the full. The friction began soon after the *Four Winds* sailed out of New York harbour, and constant nagging, extending over many months, had only made matters worse. Several times they had quarrelled openly. While floating in the water the man remembered over-hearing a significant remark made by one of the crew.

“Either Legs or the Old Man will start shooting afore this trip ends, you mark my words.” It was the boatswain who delivered the prophecy. It did not end that way, though the result came to much the same thing.

The swimmer's eyes picked out the silvery dots, far overhead, that formed the Southern Cross. Sailor-fashion, he began from that to take his bearings. Over there, between those two bright fairy lamps suspended from the sky near the horizon, was the east, where the sun would come up in a few hours. Yes, he would see it again. He sincerely hoped to see it the next time it rose also, but things might be becoming unpleasant by then.

It was a long way to the nearest land. Powerful swimmer though he was, it would never have occurred to him to try to reach it unaided, but with a life-belt on the thing became less impossible. He was going to try, at any rate. He could rest without sinking when he chose. There were a few scattered islands away to the west. The *Four Winds*' course was to have brought her within twenty miles of them. It must have been just short of four bells when he dropped over the stern of the steamer. The *Four Winds* was making a little better than nine knots. Maybe he was now twenty-five miles, as the crow flies, from the nearest island. It was only a dot on the chart, and it was doubtful whether it was inhabited. But it was a secure foothold, which one could not say of water a mile deep. And, moreover, there were other islands.

Largely by guesswork he set his course, and then rolling his great frame over, struck out with slow, powerful strokes to the westward. It was no con-

solation to reflect that some current might be carrying him in a totally wrong direction, but on the contrary it was just as likely to be taking him toward his goal.

For two hours he kept up the regular stroke with effortless ease, and then for a rest, turned over on to his back. The exercise had helped to steady his nerves. While he lay there the sun rode up over the sky-line and infused the spirit of hope into him. It was a perfect dawn. The world in which the man off the *Four Winds* had lived recently had not been a particularly perfect one, but that was finished with, anyway — utterly, irrevocably finished with.

He turned over again, and for a long time breasted the oily sea. He was getting tired, but it helped to keep his mind off thoughts which were none too pleasant. He was growing thirsty, with the brine constantly kissing his lips. He watched the sun creep steadily upward until it hung like a ball of fire almost directly overhead. The strain was beginning to tell even on his enormous strength. It was now eighteen hours since he had eaten anything. Occasionally he was annoyed to find his memory playing quaint tricks — catching up incidents of his boyhood and parading them before him now when all his thoughts should be concentrated on the effort of cleaving his way further through the ocean. There was a girl with greenish eyes when he was

eighteen. Ailwyn? No, she wouldn't have a man's name. Eileen — that was it. Something happened to her — or was it some other girl?

His right hand was hurting all the time, and constant swimming did not improve it. Murdock did that with his chin.

The swimmer rested many times during the day, but the sea dazzled him. There were half a dozen suns, all blinding and scorching, and yet he knew that there was really only one sun, and that he must keep on swimming as long as he could pick out the genuine from the counterfeits, or lose his sense of direction altogether. He was still worrying absurdly about the girl with the greenish eyes when the sun set, in what was clearly a gigantic bath of blood.

After that the man grew confused. The thirst was there all the time. He moistened his tongue deliberately once or twice with the water that wet his face when he took an awkward stroke, but it did not mend matters. Also his right hand was very painful now. These things he understood only in a dreamy fashion. His predominant thought — when he did think rationally — was that he had to keep his heavy arms and legs moving, because somewhere ahead there was land. His brain seemed to have slipped a cog on the subject of time. He tried to calculate how many hours this struggle had been going on, but he could not work it out, and

he was resting, wrestling with the problem, when his knee hit something hard.

That brought him back with a crash to the world of reality. He put his feet down and found there was but half a fathom of water. Dimly the outline of a low reef could be made out not far off. His strength was almost gone, but he managed to stagger ashore, and then stretched his six foot frame gratefully on a bed of seaweed. Thirsty and exhausted though he was, he fell into a sleep which became almost a stupor, and still another dawn was near when he opened his eyes.

It was little more than a ledge on which he lay; probably the highest spring tides submerged it entirely. But his interest was not centered on the ledge. About three miles away, distinct in the growing light, was an island on which cocoa palms grew, an island on which there must be water. And the man craved for water as he had never craved for anything in his life.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, and walked off the reef. His limbs were stiff with the long swim, but he struck out eagerly and in less than an hour dragged himself up on to a silvery beach. Away to the right there was a creek into which a stream trickled from over a rock. Lurching and stumbling, the man hurried over the sand. Then he lay full length on the ground and buried his head in the water.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL ON TAO TAO

A GIRL stood on a veranda, scanning the sea with a tense, anxious expression. Her long hair hung in two heavy, braided ropes, which gleamed like burnished copper in the early morning sun. Her dress was white and loose, of the simplest cut, while her feet, innocent of stockings, were thrust into sandals.

She was undeniably beautiful, from the top of the high forehead on which a loose strand stirred in the gentle breeze, to the graceful curves of her neck. Her brown eyes were clear and steady, and her figure was straight and lithe. For the moment, at any rate, she looked all of her twenty-three summers. There was a tinge of something akin to grief stamped on her face — grief, or bewilderment, perhaps, but not fear. The girl's eyes, the set of her square little chin, and her very poise indicated clearly enough that fear, such as one may reasonably associate with her sex, had no part in her composition. And yet there were more than the elements of danger in her position. At best the lonely isles of

the South Seas are places where there are perils for stout hearts to overcome, comforts which would satisfy few women, work which only men with iron wills and iron constitutions can hope to accomplish.

The air was wonderfully clear, even for those latitudes. Through a break in the trees, to the east, a small reef, three miles off, seemed to be scarcely more than a thousand yards distant. To the south, twenty miles from the silvery shore near where the girl stood, loomed the outline of another island. The girl trained a pair of binoculars on to this blur for full five minutes, and then swept the wide expanse of the ocean without finding anything to arrest her attention.

With a gesture of impatience, and a slight frown on her sun-tanned forehead, she lowered the field glasses and turned on her heel just as the sound of a guttural voice reached her.

“Marster Trent!”

Beyond the compound a kinky-haired black of alarming mien, who was, however, the “boss boy” on the plantation, and tractable for his kind, stood awaiting permission to cross the narrow clearing, which was sacrosanct.

“What you want, Taleile?” the girl asked, instantly assuming a more authoritative manner. “Come here.”

“Want big Marster Trent,” said the black, in the curiously unpitched voice of the South Sea islander.

"Mr. Trent he no back yet," replied the girl firmly. "He come bimeby. What for you want him?"

Taleile shrugged his shoulders, as though to indicate that the matter could wait.

"Plenty nigger lazy devil. Big Marster Trent he say clear um top patch. Um top patch plenty clear."

There was the subtle suggestion that in the absence of the planter, and definite instructions from him for the gang, they might as well loaf. Your South Sea islander seeks work neither for himself nor for those under him. When he is driven, by fear or by the magnetic power of a white man, he will just about earn the few dollars a month he is paid.

"Let plenty gang work on the one-year trees, savvy?" the girl replied without a second's hesitation. "Whole lot of work must be done there. Keep them at it, no stop, till Mr. Trent come back."

With a gesture she indicated that the interview was finished. Taleile, however, stood his ground, shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other, and grimacing after the fashion of an ape. The girl was on the point of ordering him to go when it struck her he might want to say something of importance.

"What you want now, Taleile?" she asked, half suspiciously.

Taleile had been the "boss boy" on the plantation ever since she first saw the island, four years before. He had been "recruited" originally from New Guinea. His brothers and sisters and mothers-in-law were all, doubtless, raw cannibals, and Taleile had bred true up to a point, but he had had little opportunity lately of indulging any cannibalistic tendencies inherited from his forebears. This was the second plantation on which he had worked. For a New Guinea native he had a certain amount of common sense, and that had shown him the infinite wisdom of being on the side of law and order as prescribed by the white man. There were occasions when Taleile had been almost human.

There was nothing to encourage the girl in his little beady eyes, which glittered and shifted, but at the moment the fact remained he came the nearest thing to being a protector of any kind that she had. Not that she felt desperately in need of protection. On a peg, within easy reach, hung a .45 Colt with which she could pierce a match box six times in ten seconds at fifteen paces, and not a black on the island was ignorant of that significant fact. But Boris, her Great Dane, had died mysteriously the previous day; and in the presence of Boris every black had felt the necessity of circumspection if not even politeness. More than once Taleile had gone out of his way to show that his sympathies were not altogether with his kinky-haired brethren. The

girl remembered that before she put her question. He squirmed and grimaced for a few moments while the girl stood imperiously waiting.

"Um nigger he give big dog *kai-kai*," he said mysteriously at last.

There was a catch in her breath which she endeavored to hide. One of the men, then, had fed Boris and, as she had shrewdly suspected, poisoned him.

"What nigger?" she asked, going a step nearer the black, her blood boiling.

"Um nigger," he repeated foolishly, either not knowing or not caring to air his knowledge for reasons best known to himself.

The girl, too well versed in the ways of the breed to press more closely, signalled him to go. In all probability Taleile was not lying, nor merely voicing a guess. That gave a sinister aspect to the dog's death. Of course it might have been simple revenge for some casual bite earned and administered. If she had not been alone that theory might have satisfied her; but she was alone, and doubly alone since Boris was no longer following her like a shadow. She felt that the clouds were indeed gathering.

For a time, while her brain raced over events of the last few days, the girl busied herself with simple duties in the bungalow, and the giving of orders to the house boy, until a black, clapping his

hands at the wicket gate on the far side of the compound, attracted her attention.

She beckoned him toward her.

"What you want, eh, Baloo?" she asked.

The nigger opened his vast mouth, and pointed to a tooth.

"Um plenty sick. Want terback," he said in a tone that made her look at him sharply.

"Toothache?" she observed. "You take um medicine."

Leaving the man on the veranda, she turned into the bungalow and, opening a small case, selected a bottle. She glanced through the open window at Baloo, wondering momentarily whether he had consciously spoken insolently. Her eyes wandered to the long whip which hung just within the door in case of emergency. Hitherto she had never used it, though the thing was used occasionally as a means of assisting a native to distinguish between right and wrong.

With a wad of cotton wool in one hand and the bottle in the other, she returned to the veranda.

Baloo, whose tooth did not ache, scowled. Medicine was of no use to him.

"Want plenty stick terback," he said, with growing boldness.

"No get tobacco," the girl declared with an air of finality. "You take um medicine."

She met the creature's eyes squarely and saw something in them that stirred her unpleasantly. Had the Great Dane been there she would have had the man bolting like a rabbit. Baloo, who had never come into direct conflict with the girl before, misjudged her. He wanted tobacco, and knew there was plenty in the store. Moreover, he knew the planter was within neither sight nor hearing. He was a raw native, recruited but a few months before, with almost no ideas on the subject of restraint, and accustomed all his life to the doctrine of right and might being synonymous.

Without removing her eyes from him, the girl stepped backward, and unhooked the long, evil-looking whip.

Baloo knew that whip. His introduction to it was effected within a week of his being taken to the island, and the recollection was highly painful.

"Go," the girl cried, gripping the short handle and allowing the pliant lash to wave menacingly.

The black half crouched, but not cringingly. He was getting ready to leap, and as the girl divined this she became aware for the first time in her life of her own physical weakness. Thrashing blacks with a whip is not a woman's work. The mere idea of it was repellent to her, but without dallying further she sent the lash coiling against his shoulders. Baloo, who had anticipated this by the fraction of a second, sprang forward and seized the

thick end of the lash, near the stock. She gripped the handle, but knew she was no match for the black in strength. The idea flashed across her mind of releasing her grasp of the whip and making a dash for the loaded revolver, but the black was now between her and the door.

He gave a wrench: her slender wrist barely stood the strain.

"Boris! Boris! Here!" she called; but Baloo well knew the dog's fate.

No further word was spoken, and the savage glitter of the man's eyes and the cruel smirk on his coarse face told the girl more plainly than words what dire peril she was in. Fear clutched at her heart as, clinging desperately to the whip, and still confronting the mutinous black with an expression of mingled courage, disdain and righteous anger, she strove to think of some way to safety.

Again the black wrenched at the whip, and, as the tug almost lifted her from her feet, her strained fingers relaxed and the weapon slipped from her grasp.

And then two things she saw simultaneously — the brutal triumph on the hideous countenance and the astounding figure of a white man, clad in shirt and trousers, hurling himself across the compound!

He was within ten feet of the steps before the black saw him. For a moment the latter was too startled to move. Then, as the stranger leaped up

the steps Baloo dropped the whip and sprang to the rail. But he was too late. A pair of firm hands gripped him, and in a flash he was lifted above the veranda rail and sent crashing to the compound below.

For a moment he lay there, in the hot dust, stunned, bewildered. Then, with a malevolent grimace he scrambled to his feet and beat a hasty retreat.

The stranger, snatching up the whip, leaped down the steps and, overtaking the black at the gate, sent the lash hissing through the air. A shrill cry of pain rang out as the leather thong bit into the ebony flesh, and then the offender was gone in a rush of bare feet. The stranger crossed back to the steps.

"I hope you aren't hurt," he said, really seeing her now for the first time, when standing awkwardly below, as though he were an intruder, he looked up into the still surprised eyes of the girl. The surprise was mutual, for, while he had been prepared to find a few blacks, breech-clouted and odoriferous, or, if fortunate, a white planter, pajamaed and rum-soaked, such a brown-eyed, slender vision as gazed down on him from the veranda had been far outside his imaginings. A sense of inadequacy as to his attire troubled him, for his water-soaked shirt and trousers seemed sadly out of place just then.

"No. Thanks — no, no, I'm not," she said, be-

wildered. "Who are you? Are — are you from a trading steamer?"

"Why — yes, that is, a tramp," the man replied.

Her face cleared.

"The best anchorage is off here," she said, pointing down to the stretch of water between reef and island. Then her eyes fell on his clothing, steaming in the hot sun. "But — but you are wet through," she added. "You never *swam* ashore!"

"There wasn't anything else to do," he said. "They did not hear me after I fell overboard."

"Where was that?" the girl asked solicitously.

"Away off there," he replied, pointing vaguely; and then, feeling strangely weak, it dawned on him suddenly that he was ravenously hungry.

"Sit down on the veranda," she urged. "You must be starving."

As she turned into the bungalow he heard her giving orders to the house boy in *beche-de-mer* English, the strange polyglot spoken wherever whites and blacks commingle in the South Seas.

"My word, Maromi, you fetch *kai-kai* and coffee plenty quick. White marster plenty too much hungry."

Soon the unmistakable sizzle of frying ham set the guest's mouth watering, and the rich aroma of coffee reached his nostrils tantalizingly. It seemed an age, though it was really only a few minutes,

before he found himself seated at a table spread with white linen, before a breakfast such as a prince might have hungered for. The girl left him while he ate, for he was clearly famished, and he had nearly finished when she came back.

"How long had you been without food?" she asked.

"About thirty hours. But I shouldn't have minded so much if I'd known there was a breakfast like that waiting for me. I'm up to the neck in debt to you now."

"I am afraid the balance is still a long way in your favour," the girl replied. "When my brother returns I hope he will be able to thank you better than I can and help me to repay you still further. Our name is Trent," she said. "My brother is Chester Trent. I am Joan Trent."

A flicker of embarrassment passed over the man's face.

"Mine is — is Keith," he said awkwardly. "I'm — I'm a sea-going man, with no visible means of support for the moment, as you see, and my ship is some hundreds of miles away by now."

She gave him a quick, feminine, comprehensive glance which revealed ten times more to her than a man would have seen in an hour. Even with his face bristling with a two days' growth of beard he was, she decided, not unattractive as to countenance, while he was tall and evidently strong, as

witness his treatment of Baloo. His dark hair was tinged at the temples with grey, though he could not yet be thirty. He had a firm mouth about which were humorous lines, and his grey eyes suggested determination and quiet power, but could twinkle pleasantly enough at times. He neither spoke nor acted as did the only deck hands she had ever seen, and yet there was no reason for disbelieving his story.

Where Joan expected her brother to return from did not immediately become clear to the man who called himself Keith. Obviously the planter was not on the island, for it was only three miles across and the visitor learned that Chester Trent had been absent several days. Without being unduly inquisitive, Keith was puzzled to know what pressing business had called him away, leaving his sister alone with a gang of natives in charge of a "boss boy," who was a South Sea islander himself, and a house boy who, in the event of trouble, would naturally join his black brothers. Joan, however, avoided the subject as though reluctant to allow blame to rest on her brother's shoulders; and Keith, anxious though he was to do anything in his power for this unprotected girl, refrained from questioning her. During the day she took him over the plantation, which struck him as being woefully neglected. There was missing from it that air of prosperity and order which he had seen on many island

plantations in the course of his trading experiences in the Sulu Sea and all along the other rim of the equator away to the south, even as far as the far flung Solomons. He concluded that as Trent had had the place four years he was either singularly incompetent as a planter or that he had other fish to fry. And as there are many different kinds of fish in the South Seas, some reputable, some doubtful, and some frankly disreputable, Keith decided to accept the position without making the girl uncomfortable. For her part, Joan asked little or nothing about his world from which he had appeared so surprisingly, and their talk was chiefly of plantations, and trade, and freights, concerning all of which she had considerable knowledge.

“To such hospitality as we have to offer you are very welcome,” the girl said after the simply furnished guest room had been prepared for him, “but I am afraid you will be a sort of prisoner on Tao Tao for several weeks. Tramps and schooners do call occasionally on the off chance of picking up cargo, but they are infrequent.”

Keith pondered the statement for some time after he stretched his great frame between the sheets, and gave vent to a sigh of utter contentment. For reasons of his own he did not desire to become too closely associated with any members of the shipping fraternity for the present. The longer he remained

buried in obscurity the better it would suit him. His needs, for the present, were few, and at any rate he would have no difficulty in making himself sufficiently useful about the place to balance the cost of his keep. But apart from his own convenience in being precipitated into this elysium, he reflected, as he buried his head deep into a pillow softer than any that ever touched his head on the *Four Winds*, it occurred to him that he was peculiarly fortunate in having arrived there, for Joan Trent's sake. Yes, and also for his own sake because Joan Trent was there. Musing over this fact contentedly, and without a thought for the morrow — the morrow of months hence when Tao Tao would remain but a pleasant dream for him, to be recalled through the long watches of the night on some steamer's bridge in far-off seas — he drifted off to sleep.

But his sleep was not dreamless. The last forty-eight hours had been crowded with too much adventure for placid slumber. He was back on the *Four Winds*, where everything was topsy-turvy. The ship would persist in going backward though the engines were driving her full ahead; and the man at the helm was a deaf mute. But he must keep on swimming at all costs, though the water got into his mouth and was choking him. Drifting seaweed had become entangled round his throat, tighter and tighter. He could hardly breathe . . .

Then he was suddenly and horribly awake in the heavy darkness of the unfamiliar room, awake to a vivid consciousness of pain and danger. In his nostrils was the reek of a black body, and at his throat two hands were fastened like steel bands.

CHAPTER III

JOAN TRENT'S STORY

KEITH strove to cry out, strove to give one frantic twist of his body, but was still pinned down by the neck. The pain was excruciating. His eyes were starting out of his head. He was now quite unable to breathe. His brain worked like lightning. He realized that from that moment onward he would be losing strength. In thirty seconds or so he would be helpless. Gripping the wrists that were killing him, he began to make a supreme physical effort. He could get little purchase, for his opponent's knee was holding him down, but Keith threw his last ounce of strength into the strain, and by the time his rapidly beating heart had thumped a dozen strokes his unseen enemy's fingers began to loosen. Once they had started to slide Keith was able to gasp a breath, and the crucial instant passed. There was no sound save that of two men breathing hard. Each knew his life was forfeit if he were beaten.

Keith kept his own fingers closed as tightly as ever, even when the pressure on his throat was re-

moved. His assailant had now become his prisoner. All Keith had to do was to call, and Joan, who was sleeping in the next room, would come to his assistance with the Colt. But he hesitated to summon her, partly because he now felt equal to tackling the situation alone, and partly because he wanted the grim satisfaction of triumph single-handed. It was a stiflingly hot night, and the struggle had made him burst into sweat. There came a momentary deadlock in the fight. The black's wrists were greasy. He made a slight feint, as though abandoning the struggle to get free, and then gave a frantic jerk. His wrists slipped away, and before Keith had time to leap from his bed there was the sound of a man scrambling through the open window.

Quick though Keith was, he reached the casement too late: and then, with a grunt, he fumbled for matches and struck a light. He closed and fastened the window, laved his bruised throat for a while, and then lay down again, though, instead of sleeping he was listening intently for suspicious sounds.

When the sun began to stream into his room and he heard some one moving about, Keith put on such clothes as he had, and found Joan Trent on the veranda.

"I hope you slept well," she greeted him cheerfully.

"Very, thank you," he replied, undecided at the instant what to tell her.

It occurred to him that the girl looked younger and fresher, as though she had had the first sound night's rest for some time. She was much more cheery than on the previous day, and this, he shrewdly suspected, was because she felt the advantage of having some one handy to protect her. Several times, however, she scanned the shimmering sea, in the direction of the island twenty miles away to the south, with an anxious expression, and Keith knew it was her brother she was thinking about. In view of what had happened during the night Keith, too, felt an interest in the planter's return, for Trent certainly ought to be informed that murder had been attempted in the bungalow where he had left his sister.

"Have you any special reason to expect him back to-day?" Keith quietly asked her as, for the tenth time, she trained the binoculars on to the ocean.

A troubled look passed over the girl's face. He saw that she was hesitating—that there was a struggle going on within her between two conflicting emotions.

"Miss Trent," he said earnestly, "forgive me if I say anything you don't like, or if I say it tactlessly. I'm a complete stranger to you, and you haven't the least reason to believe you can trust me any more than the next waster who drifts up in this queer part of the world." The girl's steady brown eyes were

fixed on him not unkindly, and what the man read there told him that so far he was not giving offense. "Of course, it has nothing to do with me," he went on, "but if anybody's in any kind of trouble just now don't forget I'm lying around idle, and I don't care about being idle if there's any way I can be useful."

"I think I understand what you mean, Mr. Keith," Joan replied in level tones, "and I appreciate your kindness more than I can say. But so far as I know there is no trouble — no trouble of that kind, I mean, at present. I won't pretend that I am altogether happy, but I hardly think either my brother or I realized exactly how lonely I should be while he was away. You see, I have helped to handle these blacks for four years, and in that time one learns a good deal. Moreover, in the ordinary way, I should not describe myself as timid. Chester said the business that took him to Tamba, the island you see over there, was important. He has been away five days, though he only expected to be one or possibly two. The ketch, however, runs across before a favourable breeze, in two or three hours. I had no particular anxiety until my dog Boris died. You know what happened after that, but you arrived on the scene in time, and I really see no occasion to be alarmed."

Keith watched a great sea bird wheeling high overhead for a while before replying.

"In the meanwhile, it is five days since your brother left you, protected only by a dog," he said at last bluntly.

"My brother has doubtless been detained," she replied, slightly less cordially.

"Precisely, Miss Trent," the man agreed. "I have no wish to alarm you, but the point I'm worrying about is, do you think he is still a — a free agent?"

Joan looked at him, round-eyed.

"It never occurred to me to doubt it," was her reply. "The weather has been perfect ever since he left, so nothing can have happened to the ketch. If he has not met with some accident he would be quite safe at Tamba, unless —" Her voice trailed off. Keith's eyes met hers.

"Don't tell me if you don't want to, Miss Trent," the man said, "but it is that 'unless' which seems to worry you most, if I'm any judge."

"I think my brother has been a — a little foolish lately," Joan replied, half reluctantly. "I believe he is really sound to the core, but for some time now he has been associating with a man whose influence has done him no good."

Keith had seen too many good men go wrong in those latitudes not to get an inkling of her meaning, but it seemed no moment for beating about the bush.

"You mean he's drinking?" he asked in matter-of-fact tones.

The girl nodded.

"Chester was all right until a few months ago," she said. "Perhaps he needs a dose of civilization to help him to realize his folly. I do not think it is good for any one to remain here without a change for four years, as he has done. One cannot blame a man if the finer side of him begins to wear a little thin at the edges when he stays too long. But there were — complications. We wanted to spend a few months in Sydney, at any rate, but Chester felt we could not afford it at present. There is so much to be done on the plantation. I know perfectly well that it has been neglected. In another year or two this should be a profitable venture, and if we left it now, even for a few months, it would slide back badly, for there is nobody I know whom we could leave in charge of the place."

"And you think your brother is probably playing the fool now at Tamba?" the man ventured.

"I am afraid of it," Joan replied reflectively. "There is a Portuguese over there named Moniz whom Chester goes to see. Moniz" — the girl repressed a shudder at the memory of the man — "is an odious creature. He is a trader, of sorts. He is the kind of individual who is open to do anything — even disreputable things — for money. He came over here about a month ago and I did not

trust him from the moment I saw him. He is swarthy, oily and persuasive; and utterly without principle. I am terribly afraid Chester will become entangled with him financially. Moniz knows just what this plantation of ours will be worth when the trees begin to bear, and he would like to obtain control of it. If he does that, we, after spending years on the place, shall only be squeezed out of it when the dividends begin."

Keith nodded understandingly. He had seen that sort of thing happen. Only he assumed the young idiot had slid further down the hill than Joan imagined, or he would not have allowed the makings of such an unholy crash, as seemed imminent, to arise.

"Have you any inkling of the business that took your brother over to Tamba?" he asked.

"Yes, and that raises still another complication," Joan said thoughtfully. "I have had nobody to discuss these things with, and perhaps Chester would think me indiscreet for speaking of it now, but I believe it can do no harm, and it is a great relief to talk over one's troubles with a fellow being. There are pearl oysters near Tao Tao. Chester is growing impatient waiting for the plantation to bear, and he is convinced that he might make a fortune more quickly at pearl-ing."

Keith gave an unsympathetic gesture.

"It's a great gamble," he said. "I spent a while pearling on the Indian grounds, and off the north-east of Borneo; and I have seen nearly as many men lose a fortune as make one at the game. I admit it has its fascinating side, though. Have any pearls actually been found near here?"

"Not many. Chester has three divers, and they have taken up tons of shell. There are plenty of seeds, but I imagine very few pearls of real value. When Chester first started he came across two good pearls, and they fired his imagination. He went to work strenuously, but luck was against him after the start. All he found was seeds and a few small baroques."

"Has he good divers?"

"As far as I know, yes. They are New Guinea men. They seem to understand their work. I don't think the fault lies with them. It is just this. Chester was misled by the finding of the first two good pearls. It was a sort of flash in the pan, and it is hard to convince him the sea will only form a graveyard of our capital if he does not give the whole thing up and turn his undivided attention to the plantation."

Fully sympathetic with Joan though Keith was, he could still understand her brother's frame of mind. Had he not been bitten himself with the pearl fever? Had he not groped, apparently within arm's length of boundless fortune until, if not his

heart, at least his pocket, had been broken? And he had had to revert to a less romantic though more practical means of making a livelihood at the moment when success had appeared just within (and yet just without) his grasp, like some maddening, tantalizing *ignus fatuus* luring him on to destruction.

"But what has Tamba got to do with pearling off Tao Tao? Please understand, Miss Trent, I still do not want to ask any question that seems inquisitive."

"There is no direct connection," the girl said, "and yet I fear that there may be if Chester is not very careful. Primarily he went across for stores. That was rather an urgent matter. There were certain other things that he had to do, and also, I think, he had been growing increasingly restless for a little society other than mine."

"Does Moniz do any special trade in — in the sort of stores that come bottled?" Keith asked.

"Yes, and that, I fear, may account for the delay. I am sure Chester would never have stayed away as long as this if that were not the case. Moniz is crafty, and he would have an ulterior object in extending too-generous hospitality. When he came over here Chester asked him a number of questions about pearls which undoubtedly put the Portuguese on the scent of the fact that we had actually found some. Moniz hinted that he would like to have a

share in any venture of the kind, and I did not like the look he gave Chester when my brother laughed the matter off —”

“Look!” Keith interrupted, pointing far out to sea, where a white sail was glinting in the high noon sun.

“That is the *Kestrel*,” the girl announced with a deep sigh of satisfaction. “She ought to be here within half an hour. Let us go down to the beach to meet her.”

The girl’s eyes were dancing with pleasure at the thought of her brother’s return. She had borne up bravely under the anxiety and uncertainty, and now the strain was over, her relief was palpable.

“Chester will be surprised to find he has a visitor,” she said as they scrambled down the path to the water’s edge.

Keith smiled; but he was wondering what sort of man he was about to meet. He was wondering, too, whether Chester Trent would resent the presence of a stranger on Tao Tao. In common decency the girl’s brother would naturally be polite to a man cast on to his island, but there was an atmosphere about Tao Tao suggesting that strangers might be in the way. It was a pity, because few places in the world would have suited Keith as well for the present as that lonely island. There was little fear of any one asking awkward questions and — moreover, there was Joan Trent. She, it

seemed, had accepted him as a friend, though doubtless only because good fortune had brought him to her at a moment of desperate peril. But how her returning brother would accept him remained to be seen; and, as the ketch's anchor cable ran out and Keith watched the little craft swing into the wind with her mainsail flapping, that problem occupied his thoughts.

CHAPTER IV

MONIZ SHOWS HIS TEETH

THREE forms tumbled into the small boat trailing astern of the *Kestrel*, and when it neared the shore Keith saw Chester Trent sitting in the stern. Trent frowned beneath the broad brim of his pith helmet as the keel grated on the beach, and enquiringly ran his eyes over the half-clad figure standing by the side of his sister.

"Hello, where have you bobbed up from?" he asked as he climbed over the side. He was a fine-looking youngster, about a year older than his sister, bronzed and well-knit. A good-humoured smile played about his mouth, but his eyes were blood-shot and Keith knew the girl's suspicions had been correct.

"This is Mr. Keith, Chester," Joan said. "He swam to the island after falling off a steamer."

"Fell overboard, eh!" said Trent. "You were lucky to get here."

"It was fortunate for me," Joan added. "Balloo was just snatching the whip from me when Mr. Keith arrived in time to throw him off the veranda."

Chester Trent gave a quick look at his sister and

for an instant an expression akin to shame flitted across his face. Then, quietly, he walked up to Keith and shook hands with him.

"I'm — I'm eternally obliged to you," he said. "Fact is, I oughtn't to have stayed away, but I couldn't help it. Been playing the silly ass, y'know. Mustn't do it again. Got mixed up with the foolish waters. No good. Think I'll turn in for a few hours. Must get my head clear. Things have been happening and some more things are likely to happen in a hurry."

"Has anything serious gone wrong, Chester?" the girl asked anxiously.

"M — yes, I'm afraid everything's gone wrong, and it wasn't altogether my fault. I'll have to think this out. But first I must turn in for a while. I haven't had a wink of sleep for forty-eight hours and I'm all in."

Without another word he turned up the path leading to the bungalow, stretched himself in a hammock on the veranda, and promptly fell fast asleep.

Keith noticed a change in him when he awoke a few hours later — a decided change for the better. Chester Trent was intelligent, and the same quiet courtesy that marked Joan was observable in him. His first words were a renewal of thanks to Keith for defending his sister.

"Tell me what happened over at Tamba?" she asked.

Trent ran one hand through his hair and looked out toward the reef visible between the trees.

"You were quite right about Moniz," he said, addressing Joan. "That chap is an unmitigated wrong 'un. I believe he'd do away with his own grandmother if he thought he could make a profit out of it. The blackguard got me to stay two nights on various pretexts, and broached a case of whiskey for the occasion. But he kept his own head clear enough. I say, Keith, you look like a useful sort of man to have around in a rough and tumble. I wonder if I could count on you to help if there's trouble."

"Sure. I'll lend a hand if I can be of any assistance," replied Keith gladly. "What is it? Niggers?"

"Yes, but niggers under a Portuguese called Moniz. D'you see that reef?" he added, pointing.

"That's where I first landed after a pretty long swim," Keith replied.

"Well," said Trent, "I've got a notion that there may be some pearls off there." Keith glanced at the girl but her face was expressionless. Evidently she preferred her brother to tell his own story. "The fact is, we've been fishing there on and off for some months. I've found enough to make me think there might be money in the venture. But Moniz has heard something about it. There are dozens of reefs, all round the island, and the only

pearl oysters I have come across are near that reef over there. Now, Moniz particularly wanted to know exactly where I had been fishing. If anyone makes a fortune at it he wants a nibble, and by the time Moniz's nibble is finished there won't be enough left to keep a fly in molasses for a week. He's an astute old bird, though. He didn't say a word of this until he thought I was half tight. Then he opened out, in his oily way, and I saw what he was after. So I shut down, and then he practically held me a prisoner while he got at my three divers, who were on the *Kestrel*. He primed them for two days until they were willing to talk about anything; and then I suppose he found out all he wanted. One of the divers came back with me, but the other two have disappeared. He's bribed 'em to stop with him, of course, and that makes it all the worse, for they, having been down off the reef, know as much about the oyster bed as I do. Moniz is showing his teeth, and he's going to bite."

"Just how dangerous is he likely to be?" asked Keith.

"That's hard to say," replied Trent with a frown, "but it's my conviction that as he has gone so far he might stop at nothing now. Moniz is smooth when it suits him to be so, but when he gets ugly he's the very devil."

"Well, two can play at his game," said Keith. "Count me in if there's trouble."

Trent grinned.

"It looks to me as though you'd just dropped from the clouds at the right time," he said. "By the way, how on earth did you come to fall overboard and not get picked up again?"

"It was after midnight and most of the hands were below," Keith said. "I was chiefly concerned about missing the propeller at the moment, and by the time I got my breath the ship was some distance off."

"You must have thought your number was up when they didn't hear you."

"I knew I had a sort of fighting chance to make one of these islands. Are most of them inhabited?" he asked easily, hoping to change the subject.

"Not by any manner of means," replied Trent, "though the niggers visit nearly all of them at times. Were you — were you the skipper?"

"No, mate," Keith replied briefly, not wishing to appear too blunt nor to create any undue mystery about himself.

"Well, you haven't brought much baggage along with you," Trent laughed. "I think I can fix you up though. You're welcome to any of my duds. They'll be a trifle small, but you mustn't mind that. There's nobody to criticise except Joan, and she's getting about accustomed to seeing me go round in old things. Come into my room and we'll see what there is."

Keith accepted a few shirts, some duck trousers, a pair of canvas shoes and a hat, all he needed for the present.

"I say, it's mighty decent of you to offer to help us out," said Trent.

"That's nothing. One must do something, and it promises to be exciting. Now, tell me, how many can we muster and depend on? Most niggers of the South Seas aren't worth ten cents a dozen when fighting starts."

"Let's see. There's Joan. She's as good a recruit as any. Besides the three of us there are three Kanakas I use on the ketch as sailors. They're fairly sensible, and could be relied on, I believe. One diver is left. He's either to be trusted or he's now in Moniz's pay. It's impossible to say which. That's seven. Then there's Taleile, the boss boy. I believe he realizes it would pay him best to stick to us. That makes eight. Also there's Peter Pan. We could count on him to stand by us to the end of time."

"Peter Pan?" Keith repeated, puzzled. Joan, who had joined them, smiled.

"He's quite grown up in one way," she said. "For an islander he is a perfect giant. Maybe he is thirty years old. He certainly is the most cheerful black I ever knew. They are all very simple in a way, though it is simplicity tempered with cunning as a rule. But Peter Pan is just a huge child.

He broke both his legs two years ago and he thought the devil-devil was going to get him till Chester patched him up. As soon as he knew he wasn't going to die he began to worship Chester, not in your half-hearted civilized fashion, but with the intense fervour of a savage. I believe he thinks my brother performed a sort of miracle on him when Chester put his legs into splints. Chester tries to look and act like a deity when Peter Pan is around so that he may live up to the beliefs of his one and only true believer."

"As a matter of fact, Joan," her brother put in, "you are Peter Pan's deity, and though I never said so, I always thought you overdid the deity part of it when he was around. But listen here. Including Peter Pan, our army numbers nine," Trent went on. "I couldn't trust any of the others. They might fight, if I urged them, but if they saw the least advantage to themselves in so doing they'd turn on us."

"I think you judge them a little too harshly, Chester," Joan said quietly.

"I don't know about that," Keith observed. "I'd trust any one of them just about as far as I could throw him. Didn't you get your lesson when that chap took the whip from you?"

"They're not all like Baloo," Joan declared.

"Let's hope not," said Trent, "but they've got a strong family resemblance, and it doesn't pay to

take any chances. I'm very glad I've taught my three Kanaka sailors to shoot with rifles. There's a gun for each of them, and they ought to be able to give a pretty good account of themselves if necessary. Joan, you have your revolver, though I hope you won't have occasion to use it. There are two more rifles, one for Keith and one for me. That's the full extent of our armoury, but we could do some damage with it."

"By the way, has it occurred to you in what particular way Moniz may show his teeth?" Keith asked. "If I were in his place I'd sink your ketch. That would leave you like a hen with one leg."

Trent looked grave.

"It certainly would put me in a desperate fix," he agreed. "I could neither go pearl fishing nor anything else then. I hope that notion doesn't get into Moniz's mind."

"Keep a close watch on the *Kestrel*, then," said Keith. "Moniz is probably wondering now how he can manage to sink her without showing his hand too plainly."

"She's anchored right here in the bay," said Trent, "with the three Kanakas on board all the time, so the Portuguese has his work cut out."

Toward evening an ominous, angry yellow glare hung over the western sky and with the setting of the sun a wind that had risen in the southeast died down to a flat calm.

"We're in for a storm," Keith declared, watching the cloud banks on the horizon, "and I shouldn't be surprised if it were a regular rip-snorter."

"The last bad one was two years ago," said Trent, "and it came horribly near blowing the island away altogether. We never really got over the damage done to the trees. I hope we don't have the same performance this year, or the plantation will suffer a whole lot more than I care to think about."

As he spoke a vivid streak of silvery flame slashed the darkening sky and a distant rumbling was borne across the water. Ten minutes later the wind had risen to a scream and rain was splashing down in sheets. The lightning was followed instantly by a crash like that of countless heavy artillery, under which the very island shook.

"Yes, we're in for it," observed Trent, "but there's one thing sure. If Moniz had intended to try any of his funny business to-night he'll have to change his plans. His little schooner would have every stick blown clean out of her if he tried to ride a gale like this out."

Gradually, for an hour, the fury of nature increased until even Keith was awed. Excepting during the lulls, conversation was impossible. The lightning continued until midnight, after which the electrical storm rolled away to the west, though the wind continued at high pressure. When Keith

turned in to bed he fastened the window of his room, and in sailor fashion, slept with a figurative eye open. The least sound except the roaring of the wind would have awakened him. Nothing happened, however, and he remained asleep until the first thin streaks of dawn were creeping over the sky.

Instantly he sat up in bed. The wind had gone down.

“Now, if I were that Portuguese—” he muttered to himself; and then he began to dress in a leisurely way. He had slept enough for the present, anyway, and he had a curious desire to “go on deck” as he would have expressed it. Moving quietly, not to disturb the other occupants of the bungalow, he lifted the bar that fastened the front door, and passed out on to the veranda.

The world seemed to have had a bath. It was still too dark to see anything in the distance, but there was the promise of a wonderful day. The air was cool and fresh. As dawn came up out of the east Keith saw there was a heavy sea running, away beyond the shelter of the island. Daylight was approaching. He could now almost make out the blur of the island in the distance—

Suddenly his frame stiffened. Several miles to this side of the island of Tamba a small schooner was running on the starboard tack. Only one schooner of that size was likely to be in those waters,

and it belonged to Moniz. Keith watched for several minutes until she came round on to the other tack, when he knew she was making for Tao Tao. Then he roused Trent.

“He’s running for the reef,” the planter cried in an alarmed tone. “Maromi,” he called to the house boy, “you fetch Peter Pan and Taleile plenty quick. My word, you hurry!”

Maromi scrambled down to the blacks’ quarters, and before he returned with the “boss boy,” and Peter Pan, Joan was up and joining in the general scramble for the beach.

CHAPTER V

THE FIGHT AT THE REEF

THE small boat had to make two journeys between the shore and the *Kestrel* before all were aboard.

The schooner, by now, was within about five miles of the reef, and running as straight for it as wind would allow. She had to beat up against the breeze, but the advantage of a strong tide was with her. The *Kestrel*, at the moment her anchor was lifted, was roughly about eight miles off the schooner, and three from the reef.

"Damned if I know what he's up to if he isn't trying to make the reef," said Trent, as the head sails bellied and the little craft turned her nose out from Tao Tao. He was scanning the distant schooner through glasses, but beyond confirming his previous suspicion that she was Moniz's boat, he could make nothing out.

"Is there any question of legal ownership of this particular patch of shell?" Keith asked.

"It wouldn't make much difference if I had a bill of sale from the oysters themselves," Trent replied bitterly. "As a matter of fact I think the reef is just within three miles of Tao Tao, in which

case the fisheries would be mine; but nobody's ever taken the trouble to pace it off. People like Moniz don't stand on ceremony or law, or stuff like that, in the middle of the Sulu Sea, if they think there's the prospect of making a young fortune in a hurry. I believe I have a legal right to the fisheries there; and I'm dead sure I've got a moral right to 'em, because nobody thought of trying for pearls there before I did."

"It's going to be a close race," Joan declared, thrilled as she watched the manœuvring of the two boats. The *Kestrel* would have been able to make the reef first but for the tide which was running hard against her.

"Yes, too close for my fancy," said Trent. "If he'd had another few minutes' start he could easily have landed on the reef first, and maybe held it. It's the luckiest thing in the world that you happened to spot her, Keith. I was a fool not to have anticipated some such move."

The schooner was now a mile off the southern extremity of the reef, and bearing down on it fast. Keith kept the *Kestrel* on her port tack as long as he dared, carrying her some distance beyond the reef, and then swung round, to cut in between the reef and the schooner. He had judged his distance nicely, for while the Portuguese trader was still four hundred yards off the coral ledge, the *Kestrel* was rapidly getting into position to intercept her.

"Starboard, there, Chuma," Keith called to the Kanaka bo'sun. "Steady. We'll take a short cut through these rocks."

Joan, with Keith standing at her side, shuddered a trifle as the *Kestrel* ran full tilt through the nest of bristling snags. Jim, one of the Kanakas, was standing in the bow, sending back silent signals to Chuma. Twice the ketch was on the verge of having her bottom torn out when, in answer to a movement of Jim's arm, she veered like a swallow, out of impending danger. Keith would never have attempted to make the passage had he not considered it desperately necessary, and, as it was, he only just emerged at the seaward side of the reef in time to meet the Portuguese.

Luffing up into the wind, he lay there for sixty seconds, watching the schooner. Moniz ran on a little way, and then there was the splash of his anchor. Immediately afterwards several hands dropped over the side into the schooner's small boat. Keith reached for a megaphone.

"Hello, there! Moniz, ahoy!" he shouted.

"Hello," came back the voice of the Portuguese.

"You keep away from that reef, or you'll get hurt," Trent declared.

"Plenty of shells for all of us, eh?" Moniz said in a wheedling voice. "Let us both try our luck, Mr. Trent."

"I'll see you in hell first," Trent shouted back.

"I'm not so sure there are any pearls worth the trouble of getting up, but if there are you'll be the last man on God's earth I'll share 'em with after the dirty tricks you've played."

A mocking sound of laughter coming over the water was the only reply; and the small boat began to pull away from the side of the schooner. Keith gave a quick signal, and the *Kestrel's* sails filled. She picked up speed before Moniz realized what was going to happen, and was soon bearing down on the small boat like an avenging steam roller.

"Look out," yelled the Portuguese, who was steering. Keith, with his teeth clenched, and the light of battle in his eyes, watched but did not speak. Chuma, steering skilfully, bent only on cutting the little boat in half with the *Kestrel's* prow, appeared to be coldly unemotional, but as watchful as a hawk.

Moniz, seeing what must occur in a few seconds if he held on his course, pressed the helm hard over. His eyes flashed venomously. Bracing himself against the thwart, he levelled a revolver at the ketch, and a splinter of wood shot up within a foot of where Joan was standing.

Keith, still by the girl's side, thrust her behind him with one arm, and fired twice at the dancing little boat. With curses and vituperation, Moniz was already urging his blacks to pull back to the schooner, leaning forward the while out of danger as much as possible. Trent took steady aim with

his rifle, and saw splinters shoot up from the gunwale, but nobody in the boat was hit. The frenzied blacks made the little craft leap forward. Chuma brought the ketch round, running as close to the wind as possible, but she made almost no headway in the direction of Moniz. Six or eight shots had been fired at the boat before it slipped round the stern of the schooner.

Chuma looked at his master for instructions. Already Moniz was hauling on his anchor.

"Keep right after him," Trent said savagely to the bo'sun; and Chuma spat on his hands to get a better grip on the wheel. "Joan," her brother added, "you'd better get down below. There's going to be blood and hair flying soon."

But Joan was in no mood to "get down below." The events of the last few minutes had been thrilling enough to stir all the adventurous nature within her. Moreover, only one shot had been fired at the *Kestrel* yet, and that did no damage. She stepped into the cockpit, where she was protected, but remained in a position to watch every move in the exciting game.

The moment the schooner attained steerage way it became apparent that Moniz was going to put up a fight. The men on both vessels took all the cover possible. Of Trent's three Kanakas, two already had their rifles ready. Chuma's attention was fully occupied in steering. Suddenly the schooner,

which had been jockeying for a position, jibed, and bore down on the *Kestrel*. A collision was the last thing either skipper wanted. Keith had to go over on the other tack, and in doing so exposed the stern of the *Kestrel*. Instantly there came two or three puffs of smoke, and bullets sang along the deck of the ketch. A halyard, severed clean through, dangled with dangerous possibilities for a moment, but it was a moment when there was no strain on it. Jim leaped at the rope, regardless of the fact that he formed an easy target. Like lightning he made it fast with a temporary hitch, but in that brief space there was a crack, and the Kanaka's left arm hung down limp. Two rifles on the schooner were now spurting lead as fast as triggers could be pressed; but Chuma swung the ketch round until Moniz found himself trapped between the devil and the deep sea. The only way he could escape a murderous, raking fire from every weapon on the *Kestrel* was to swing round on the port tack, but to do so would have put his schooner on the reef. Shooting was a difficult matter for either side, as the swell put the marksmen off their aim, but Keith and his men peppered the deck of the schooner continually for full two minutes. Her black helmsman could seek little shelter; soon he threw his hands up and fell forward.

There was an angry scream from Moniz. He could not both shoot and steer. Rushing to the

wheel to steady the vessel in her perilous position, he yelled to one of his men to take his place. But the black crew had had enough of the white man's fighting methods. Out of a score all told, half a dozen of them had been hit; two lay motionless on the deck. Bullets whizzed past Moniz's head, but he held on his course, his sails full; and, being the faster craft on a straight run, the schooner began to creep away.

Even at the last moment, Moniz, who at least knew not what cowardice was when he had a mob of blacks to deal with, tried to stir his men up to assist him in making a fresh attack; but their spirit was broken, and the Portuguese contented himself for the moment with swearing at them in half a dozen different dialects. When the space between the two vessels was wider, and shots from the *Kestrel* harried him no more, he left the wheel long enough to kick one black into taking his place, and then he went among them savagely, hammering some on the head with the butt end of his revolver, and kicking others brutally. Moniz knew just how far to go with them. To have left them unpunished would have been a palpable indication of weakness, a sign to the blacks that his iron grip was no longer a thing to reckon on. Physically, any three of them could out-match any white man who ever stepped on the Solomons. And there were far more than three of them on the schooner

who would have given all they possessed, even including a wife or two and any odd progeny that was theirs, for the pleasure of fastening their fingers round Moniz's throat. His rule was purely a rule of fear. He rarely turned his back on a solitary black; never on two. For none knew better than the Portuguese how slender was the thread on which his life hung. It was fear without respect that gave him his power, and consciousness of the fact gave even Moniz an uneasy quarter of an hour at times.

Ever watchful for an attack from behind, he saw that each cringing black suffered physical pain as a penalty for what had happened, and then, observing that the ketch had given up the chase, set about clearing up the mess on deck. The two dead men were heaved overboard. There was a swirl of water on the surface twenty seconds after the bodies dropped into the sea. At first one, and then quickly a dozen dorsal fins appeared, indicating grimly the sharp battle that was raging between the sharks for an unexpected feast. Moniz glanced casually at the wounded. These men represented money to him — a small sum, and therefore his interest in their recovery was proportionately small. Two of them seemed likely to die soon, as far as he could judge. So much the worse, for he would have to pay something in commission to have them replaced. The other four would probably recover, but he

would not get any work out of them for days, or even weeks.

He looked from them to the ketch, now far away, and shook his fist malignantly. Moniz was rarely balked in any enterprise he undertook. Scruples formed no obstacle for him. What he wanted he took, as a rule, sometimes with a slight display of diplomacy and sometimes by brute force. The veneer of civilization sat very lightly on Vasco Moniz, and just now the spirit of the primitive man within him was strangely active. And he was cunning. He had suffered reverse, but soothed his ruffled feelings with the reflection that the fortunes of war vary. As the schooner neared the buoy to which she was usually tied off Tamba, all that was vindictive about him was stirred. He had no concrete plans, but they could be formulated, all in good time.

CHAPTER VI

LEFT IN CHARGE

WITH a curious shiver, Joan put her revolver back into its holster. The danger was over, for the present. She realized now with a faint sense of dismay that she had fired a dozen shots in the hope of killing or at least injuring a fellow mortal. Squeamishness, however, in such a case, was, she realized, foolish. When one is attacked self-defense needs no apology. The adventure had been wildly exciting, especially at the moment when Moniz had seemed to have all the advantage of strategic position, but she was glad the thing was over. The *Kestrel* was running before the breeze for Tao Tao.

"I must say I take my hat off to you, Miss Trent," Keith said quietly, regarding her with respect. "I didn't once notice your hand shake."

"She's a well plucked 'un," the girl's brother observed. "The longer I live here the more I wish she had better opportunities of showing her grit than when she's up against a lot of niggers."

Joan did not speak. Fighting blacks with firearms was not one of the pursuits to which she was

naturally addicted ; and moreover she was fully conscious that she had been terribly afraid. Not, however, that she had wanted to scream out or do anything foolish. Quite early in the running fight a small pellet of lead had hit her on the forehead. It was only a tiny fragment, and it had no force behind it, but from that moment onward she had been obsessed with the fear that a bullet would strike her in the face.

“ Well, he found he’d bitten off more than he could chew that time,” Trent said thoughtfully a few moments later, as he watched the disappearing schooner through narrowed eyes. “ I wish I could think that was the last we were likely to see of the brute. Yes, Joan, I know what’s in your head, only you’re too decent to say ‘ I told you so.’ You sized him up before I did, but even you never guessed he’d try to murder us.”

“ I certainly never guessed I should ever find myself trying to murder him,” the girl replied. “ But don’t you think he has learned a lesson that may teach him not to try poaching on our preserves again? ”

Chester shook his head dubiously.

“ He isn’t that kind, I’m afraid,” he said. “ By the way, Keith, we’re no end obliged to you. I don’t know whether you expected to find that perfect peace which passeth all understanding on our little island, but if you did you were certainly dis-

appointed. This sort of thing doesn't occur every day, though, I can assure you."

Keith smiled; he was thinking of one other exciting time he had already experienced on the remarkable shores of Tao Tao — of five minutes during which he was struggling for his very life under the Trents' roof. The conviction was rapidly growing on him that perfect peace and contentment were not to be the most noticeable features of their lives on the island for some time to come.

There was a subdued air about the party as they reached shore, but this was dispelled by Joan with her cheerful optimism by the time they sat down to breakfast. If the mental strain of being involved in a battle afloat had affected her nerves at all she had regained control over them remarkably quick. The two men discussed the incidents of the shooting contest in detail, until Joan's serious expression arrested her brother's eye.

"You look worried, sis. What's the matter?" he asked.

"I wish, Chester, that you would forget you had ever heard of the existence of pearls," she said with unusual solemnity.

"Why?" the planter asked with a frown, not altogether understanding her point of view. He was vividly conscious of the fact that they had all been risking their lives only a couple of hours before because of the very pearls she was alluding to.

Hitherto she had rarely interfered with his plans, especially so far as business was concerned. His judgment, except during recent months when he had been drinking, had always seemed to her admirable. But now she saw him in danger of grasping at a shadow and losing the substance. Moreover, there appeared to be a very real risk to life and limb in grasping at the shadow which had hypnotized him.

"I saw you looking at the damage the storm had done to the trees," the girl said. "Now be reasonable. We both agree, don't we, that the plantation will look like a wilderness in no time after last night's havoc, if some pretty hard work isn't put in on it?"

"It looks as though there had been a good deal of damage, certainly," Chester agreed reluctantly; but plantation work was not uppermost in his thoughts just then.

"Well," Joan persisted, with cold logic, "another storm on the top of that last night would just about reduce Tao Tao to a desert unless we get things straight again before it comes. And in that case you must realize we should be ruined, and we could also reckon that we had wasted all these years of work."

"'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,'" observed Chester, smiling and waving his hand toward his sister.

"Well, let the babe and suckling go on talking for a minute," persisted Joan. "Now, if you fritter away more time and money in the pursuit of pearls, *and don't find any*, it looks very much to me as though you would fall between two stools, and find yourself in Queer-street, as you say."

Chester bit off the end of a cigar and examined it pensively without replying.

"I hate to butt into other people's affairs, Miss Trent," Keith said, "and there's a deal of common sense in your view, but I certainly think it would be a mistake not to give the pearl fishing a trial before abandoning it."

Chester flung a grateful glance at his newly found

"I don't find a sort of gold mine at your door every day in the week, you know, sis," she urged.

"You know perfectly well," the girl said, "that I don't want to stand in your way for an instant. I'm only warning you that you appear to me to be on the threshold of disaster, and I want you to look this thing squarely in the face. To go on as you are doing seems like madness. Chester, you have lost your grip. Your judgment is not as sound as I have known it to be. Perhaps you need a holiday. Perhaps you only need to take greater care of yourself. Anyway, you vacillate where

you would have been as firm as a rock a couple of years ago."

Her brother looked up at her reproachfully.

"I know this is hitting you right between the eyes, and you don't like it," she went on. "But the time has just about come when something had to break, Chester."

"I know, Joan. And God knows you're a brick — you're white, clean through. But you don't understand. Making money doesn't just consist of doing the obvious thing under one's nose always. You never had a thing to do with grubbing for cold cash before father died and we had to come to this place. Men have to take risks sometimes — big risks at that, if the reward is promising enough. Only a fool goes on plodding in a rut when he sees a chance to jump out and make very good another way."

"A chance, yes," the girl agreed. "But do you regard this as a reasonable chance?"

Chester frowned. He was willing to humour his sister up to a point, and listen to her arguments, but he was determined, with all the obstinacy in his composition, to have his own way as to the pearl fishing.

"I do regard it as just that — a reasonable chance," Chester replied.

"Exactly why do you think so?" Keith asked.

"Do you know anything about pearls?" Chester queried after a moment's hesitation.

"In a way, yes," Keith replied. "I don't pretend to be an expert, but I have handled a good many in my time. As I was telling your sister the other day, I have had a flutter or two at pearling."

Chester Trent took a small wallet from his pocket, and extracted a folded piece of chamois from it. This he opened with loving care, and held out two pearls in his palm.

"Those," he said, "are my justification for saying there is a reasonable chance. I'm convinced that there ought to be more of the same sort where these came from."

Keith took them into his hand and examined them carefully. They were remarkably perfect white pearls, beautifully spherical and of fine lustre.

"They're fine," commented Keith. "Are these exactly as they came out of the shell?"

"Exactly," replied Chester. "Now do you wonder that I'm keen to see if there are any more round there like 'em?"

"No," Keith said. "It certainly is tempting. Those two ought to fetch a thousand dollars apiece in New York."

"And if my luck was in I might fish up half a dozen of the same kind in a single day."

"But it is all such a gamble, Chester," the girl protested.

"Faint heart never won half a pint of little things like these," Chester replied, squinting at one of the precious objects in the light. "I hate like the deuce to disappoint you, sis, but I certainly am not going to give it up yet."

Keith was thoughtfully biting on the stem of a pipe.

"I don't see any real reason," he observed slowly, "why you should not do the best you can with the plantation and at the same time try out the pearl fishing."

"I may not be a trained business woman," Joan said, "but I do know one cannot fiddle about with two things at once and do either of them properly. Perhaps if one had a white foreman, instead of Taleile —"

"I've got it," exclaimed Chester suddenly. "Keith, you're not in a hurry to get away from here, are you?"

"Why — no," said Keith.

"Then I'll make a suggestion. These niggers need constant watching, and driving, or else they won't earn their salt. You take them in hand for a while. That will leave me free to give a thorough trial to the other business. What do you say?"

There was nothing on earth that would have appealed more to the man from the *Four Winds* than to stay on the island. He glanced at Joan and for

a second their eyes met. It gave him a curious sense of satisfaction to see that the suggestion did not appear to meet with her disapproval.

"I don't know the first thing about plantations," he said, "but I'd like to have a shot at it."

"That's bully," Chester chuckled. "Now, little lady, will that make you feel easier?"

"Providing you don't drown yourself, or get shot, or anything else foolish, Chester," the girl replied.

"The first thing I must do," her brother continued, "is to go off in the ketch for some more divers. I only have one left, thanks to Moniz, and I'm none too sure how dependable he is. I ought to be able to pick up two or three men at Borenda who will suit my purpose."

"How long are you likely to be away?" Keith asked.

"Not more than forty-eight hours if the weather holds good. I must go to-night before the moon comes up. It will be a day or two before that Portuguese blackguard tries any of his tricks on us again, and he'll never know I have gone, anyway."

"By the way," said Joan, "I don't think if I were you I would carry those pearls in my pocket on this trip, Chester. It isn't safe."

"What would you have me do with them? I can't very well deposit them in the strong room of

a bank. They are a bit of a nuisance, I admit, though."

"Give them to me, and I'll wear them tied round my neck," Joan suggested.

"And if the string breaks and you lose 'em, you'll be unhappy ever after. No, sis. But I'll tell you what we can do. Come with me."

Joan and Keith followed the planter into his bedroom, where he pointed to a tiny hole in a beam.

"Plugged up in there, they'd be safe as long as the bungalow stood," he said. "Here goes." And a few minutes later the precious little objects were safely hidden from view.

The rest of the day Chester Trent spent with Keith, showing him a hundred and one things about the plantation, and giving him a clear idea what work the gangs of blacks should be kept at to put the place in order. Taleile, the "boss boy," was, moreover, informed that Keith was the new "big white marster," whose orders must be obeyed.

"You'll find him a jewel," Chester observed, "and that's more than you can say for some of the black scum."

The two men were alone, some distance from the bungalow, where Joan was busy superintending household matters.

"There's one of them I still have an account to settle with," Keith said. "I haven't really had a

chance to talk to you about it before, because it was no use alarming your sister."

Chester shot a quick glance of enquiry at the other.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Keith replied. "Maybe it won't occur again, but the first night I slept here I had a bit of rough-house with one of the niggers. He crawled into my room in the middle of the night and tried to choke me. I'm pretty strong in the wrist so he didn't succeed. I wasn't worried about myself particularly, though. There's the girl."

Beneath the tan on his face, Chester had changed colour.

"I — I'm tremendously grateful to you, Keith, for what you've done. It makes me feel a skunk. Have you any idea which of the blacks it was?"

"Probably the chap I heaved off the porch that day. Still, it was dark and I couldn't be sure."

Chester Trent's eyes narrowed.

"I've been a fool," he commented bitterly. "Great God, I've been a fool! I never stopped to think that sort of thing was likely to happen. Keith, it was one of two things. Either that devil Baloo wanted to get square with you, or some of them are after the pearls."

"The pearls! But they had no reason to suppose I had the things."

"No, but with you out of the way, my sister and I might have been murdered more easily. They know the pearls are on the island, because the divers talk. And they know, too, that a white man doesn't go to all this trouble to get them out of the sea for the benefit of his health. They're getting too damned educated, these South Sea niggers. I'm glad he didn't get you, Keith," Chester added suddenly, extending a hand which the new overseer grasped. "We'll nab him, yet, whoever it was. It'll all come out in the washing. But we must keep our eyes peeled, or they'll nab the lot of us."

Chester Trent was visibly agitated. His none-too-steady nerves had been jarred by this startling information. He pulled a flask from his hip pocket.

"Is that the way you met trouble when you first came to Tao Tao?" Keith asked him bluntly.

"You on the water wagon?" Chester queried, with a touch of amusement.

"No, but I haven't begun to make an idiot of myself," Keith replied.

Chester laughed, but he put the flask back in his pocket, unopened. The influence of this big, blunt stranger was one which, curiously enough, did not arouse opposition in him. Not another word was said on the subject, but Chester was conscious of having been reined in, firmly and wisely.

After the swift coming of tropic night, the *Kestrel* quietly slid away from her anchorage; and when

the moon arose, bathing the island in its splendour, the man whom prudence had driven over the side of the *Four Winds* to seek seclusion in the unknown, found himself the guardian of Tao Tao and of every living soul thereon, including this brown-eyed girl to whom, after all, he was little more than a complete stranger.

She knew him only as a man who had fallen off a steamer, and had asked no questions about the thirty or so years that had gone before in his life. He half wished she had been just a mite more curious on the subject.

She found him on the veranda later, and he was surprised at the sense of elation that came to him with the sound of her approaching footsteps. She took the chair he drew toward the rail for her and seated herself in it with a long sigh of relief. The day had been an eventful one, and now that it was at an end her tired nerves were grateful for the calm and quiet of the scene. Before them, beyond the compound, framed between two sentinel cocoa-palms at the edge of the beach, stretched the moon's path across the peaceful sea, while, against a purple sky the moon itself, half-grown, glowed like molten silver. They talked long that night, and far more intimately than either had thought possible. Joan spoke of her life in England before fallen fortunes and the death of their parents had sent her and her brother seeking wealth in the South

Seas. Keith's confidences were less frank, possibly, but he, too, found pleasure in recalling old days. When, shortly before midnight, they said good night, it seemed to Keith that the pressure of her firm brown fingers was a little more kindly and he went to sleep strangely contented in the certain knowledge that the evening had established between them a new and closer sympathy.

When he awoke, just after sunrise, it was with the feeling that life was bigger and finer than ever before, and when, having jumped blithely from bed, he strode to the window and sent his gaze abroad over the world he nodded slowly in hearty approval of nature and all her works. But an instant later his smiling regard changed quickly to concern, for there, just beyond the low purple smudge that was the reef, her masts bare against the eastern sky, lay Moniz's schooner.

CHAPTER VII

MONIZ COMES BACK

DRESSING hurriedly, with a perplexed frown on his forehead, Keith hunted in the living-room for the binoculars he had seen Joan using, and passed out on to the veranda. Then he levelled the glasses at the reef and its visitors. At that distance he could not distinguish individuals clearly, but there was no doubt that diving was in active progress.

He was standing, his eyes glued to the schooner, when there came a light step on the veranda and Joan stood by his side.

"It is Moniz, I fancy," she said quietly, as the man handed the binoculars to her.

"Beyond a doubt," Keith replied. "I don't suppose he knows the *Kestrel* is away yet, but he'll soon tumble to that."

"Chester won't be back until to-morrow at the earliest," the girl said.

Keith rubbed his chin reflectively.

"That is so," he agreed. Then: "There's a whaleboat drawn up on our beach," he added. "Is she seaworthy?"

"Quite," the girl replied, "but it's no use your going off in her to tackle Moniz and his schooner."

"Why not?" Keith put the question crisply. It was galling to him to stand there and see the Portuguese calmly working the oyster beds that might contain a fortune.

"Because you may depend on it Moniz never came back without being better armed," Joan declared. "Even if he only had the two rifles that he used the last time, he could pick you off in the whale-boat, where you would be without cover. But it is more likely that he will have half a dozen boys armed now."

"Miss Trent," Keith said, "I can't stay here and do nothing. If I had no faith in the pearl fishery I'd feel different about it, but up to a point I take the same view that your brother does. I'll have to ask you to stop behind, though."

Their eyes met for several seconds, and Keith, knowing that the girl's chief thought was for his personal safety, felt curiously elated. But her look of concern did not cause him to weaken in his purpose.

"I won't take any unnecessary chances," he said. "I'll bring the boat back safely, and your boys too, if possible; but something's got to be done."

"Wait until to-morrow," the girl urged. "You could drive him off so much better in the *Kestrel*."

But Keith shook his head regretfully.

"I'm sorry to go against your wishes," he said, "but now's the time for action. It's what I'd expect your brother to do for me if the positions were reversed."

Telling Taleile to pick out eight rowers, and taking up a couple of rifles and filling his pockets with cartridges, he went down to the beach. Joan uttered no further word of protest. As the boat was pushed off she bade him good luck, and even smiled; but before the ebony hued oarsmen had taken a score of strokes the smile gave place to an expression of grave concern. The trip was a hazardous one, for it was evident from what had gone before that Moniz would not hesitate to take life rather than be driven off the reef. She stood on the beach watching until the measured splash of the oars was lost, and the whale-boat was little more than a dot in the distance. Then she went back to the bungalow and, propping her elbows on the rail of the veranda, watched its progress through the binoculars.

Keith made a wide sweep round the edge of the rocky ledge. When he came within half a mile of the schooner it was evident to him that his movements were being carefully watched. Moniz's small boat was now nuzzling the side of the schooner and for the time diving had been suspended. Keith bit his lips, while he held a rifle in readiness and toyed longingly with the trigger.

Only five hundred yards separated them — now four hundred. The oarsmen, each with his eyes fixed on Keith, continued to row steadily.

There came a puff of smoke from the schooner. A bullet struck the water fifty yards ahead of the whale-boat and ricocheted past. As the sound of the shot reached their ears the oarsmen stopped rowing.

“Washee-washee,” Keith commanded sternly. The blacks bent obediently to their task again.

Sitting bolt upright, and swaying slightly to counteract the motion of the boat, Keith levelled his rifle at the schooner. He could see nobody on board, for all hands had sought cover, so he fired at the deck, more or less at random.

An instant later a shrill scream came from the schooner. A black sprang to his feet, threw up his arms, spun round and fell. A grim smile of triumph lit up Keith's face. It had been a lucky shot — one he could not hope to equal in a dozen — but it had given Moniz something to think about.

Keith held up his hand as a signal to his rowers to stop. Immediately they all ducked below the gunwale, as though the frail shell of the boat were impervious to rifle fire. Keith, however, remained in the same position, and pulled the trigger again. Two or three bullets spurted from the schooner almost simultaneously, one of them splashing into the water within a foot of the boat.

A dozen times Keith fired, but so far as he could see only his first shot had been effective. Then a shot hit the whale-boat just beneath the water-line. It split a plank, allowing a stream of water to trickle through, and lodged in the shoulder of a crouching black, who groaned, but lay still. Keith still continued to pepper the schooner for several minutes, in the vain hope that Moniz would abandon his position rather than run any further risk; but the schooner's anchor remained down and a steady stream of lead was directed at the whale-boat. Chips flew as the bullets ripped their way into the hull. Several minor injuries were inflicted on the crouching blacks and Keith himself sustained a long flesh wound on one cheek. Then a lucky shot put a second hole below the water-line, and Keith, realizing the futility of further efforts, ordered the whale-boat to be swung around.

As the blacks bent again at their oars a burst of taunting laughter came from the schooner. Keith, however, did not look back, though more than one shot was sent after him. His face was grim. He had failed. True, the task had been a well-nigh impossible one, but there was little consolation in that. Moniz had been left in undisputed possession of the field and now knew that he could fish to his heart's content — at any rate for the present.

Joan was at the water's edge when the whale

boat grated on the beach, her gaze fixed on Keith's bleeding face.

"You're hurt!" she cried.

"Only a scratch from a flying splinter," he answered lightly as he sprang out. "Nothing of consequence, really."

"You're sure?" she asked anxiously.

"Quite. One of the boys, though, needs some mending."

"I heard a lot of firing," she said, relieved, "and I lost sight of you after you got round the edge of the reef. Tell me what happened."

"There isn't much to tell," Keith replied glumly, "except that Moniz is in complete command of the situation. If you'll be kind enough to get me some antiseptic dressing I'll fix this fellow's shoulder up first. It isn't serious."

"I am glad you came back safely," the girl said to Keith when they were once more on the veranda and he had told the story of the skirmish. There was unmistakable sincerity in her voice.

"There wasn't much danger," he said awkwardly.

"I know there was," she declared; "and now I hope you will leave that blackguard alone until Chester comes back."

His eyes wandered over the ocean to the masts of the schooner rising behind the purple loom of the reef, and then back to her.

"Miss Trent," he began, "Moniz isn't going to get the best of us. He's scored the first trick, and I expect it has tickled him to death. It's no use butting up against him single-handed, but I'm not going to lie down and call the deal off. Maybe your brother will turn up early in the morning, in which case there'll be something doing out there. Until he does come, though, Moniz has everything his own way. All we can do is to hope he won't find any pearls."

Throughout the forenoon he paced the beach restlessly, pausing now and then to look out in the direction of the reef. It was maddening to be so utterly impotent. Towards evening he was quick to notice a change in the direction of the wind. It had been coming in light breezes from the south all day, but now it was due southeast, and increasing in strength. Moreover the sky was overcast, and the night promised to be a dark one. As the wind steadily grew stronger an idea came to him. He was in the frame of mind to take bigger chances than he might have done usually. By midnight, he reasoned, everybody on the schooner would be sound asleep except, possibly, one or two on watch. The schooner was lying in such a position that if her anchor cable were severed she would drift straight on to the long reef before a southeast wind, and with a sharp knife he could cut through her cable in three or four minutes.

"They are still there, I see," Joan said as he entered the bungalow for supper. "You look awfully pleased about something. What is it?"

"For the first time in my life I envy a nigger the colour of his skin," Keith said.

The girl looked at him, puzzled.

"Why?"

Keith briefly outlined his project.

"If the sentries on the schooner weren't half asleep they'd be sure to see me in the water, and they could drill holes in me as they liked."

"I have it — Peter Pan!" Joan exclaimed.

"Would he do it?"

"He would do anything in the wide world for either Chester or me," the girl declared. "The only question is whether I ought to put him to the risk. Peter wouldn't mind, but I should never forgive myself if I sent him out there and he got killed."

"What sort of a swimmer is he?"

"He's like a shark in the water."

"Then you needn't have any fear for him, if only it keeps dark enough. They wouldn't see him in a month of Sundays, and if necessary he can dive underneath to do the cutting."

The girl's eyes sparkled. The idea appealed to her immensely.

"I only stipulate one thing," she said.

"What is it?"

"I go in the boat too."

"There's no objection to that," Keith said, after a moment's consideration. "We shall only go near enough to land at one end of the reef. The rest is up to Peter Pan. Suppose we ask him?"

The girl clapped her hands to summon the house boy, and sent for Peter Pan, who appeared at the veranda in a few minutes.

"Peter," she said, "you plenty good swimmer, eh?"

The black grinned. He was tall for a South Sea islander, and his body was lean and lithe.

"There's a little schooner anchored off the reef there," Joan said, pointing seaward.

The black uttered a guttural assent, nodded, and also pointed seaward.

"I take you out in whale-boat to the reef. Then you swim plenty too much quiet to the schooner and cut the cable, eh?"

The black again nodded. It was not for him to reason why his white mistress should make such a peculiar request. Sufficient that she made it. Doubtless those on the schooner were her enemies, and that being so he would willingly board the ship and fight the whole crew single-handed for her.

Joan went indoors for a moment and returned with a large bone-handled knife.

"You cut rope with this, Peter Pan," she said,

“and then I give you knife to keep. Go away now. I send for you bimeby.”

For the next few hours they could only wait with all the patience they could muster. The night proved to be perfect for their purpose. The wind was now blowing strongly, straight toward the reef from where the schooner lay, and the dwindling moon was obscured by heavy clouds. Keith's chief fear was that he might not reach the reef in the darkness.

It was two hours after midnight when the whale-boat was pushed off the beach. Keith did not consider it necessary to have the oars muffled, as the wind would carry any slight noise they made away from those on the schooner. The blacks pulled for over half an hour before Keith stopped them and listened intently. Presently he distinguished the swish of the waves as they hit the reef away to the right. Steering was largely guess-work in the darkness, and at any moment a jagged peak might pierce the bottom of their craft. They were, however, under the lee of the reef, and fortune favoured them, for presently the bows ran on the short, shelving beach. It had been arranged that Peter Pan was to swim back to the reef after severing the schooner's cable, and then, if he did not readily find the whale-boat he was to call until Keith answered.

The black glided away into the darkness, crossed

the narrow ledge and then stood like an ebony statue, peering into the gloom toward where the schooner lay some three hundred yards to windward. Presently he lowered himself into the water, knife in teeth, and set out with long, easy strokes. So far he had not made out the schooner, but after going straight into the wind for a few minutes he turned and swam parallel with the reef. Before long the dark form of the boat loomed up not far away. Without a sound he propelled his body forward, made a slight detour, and then dived as silently as a seal. Grasping the cable, he lifted his head to the surface and filled his lungs. Then he lowered himself once more and slashed at the tough manila. Twice he had to come up to breathe before the last strand gave way. Then, with the precious knife he had earned with his skill and cunning clenched again in his teeth, he paddled softly away, leaving the schooner to her fate.

CHAPTER VIII

A FLAG OF TRUCE

SCARCELY a word was spoken in the whale-boat during the half hour that followed Peter Pan's departure on his perilous errand. Keith and the girl sat together in the stern, while one of the blacks, painter in hand, stood on the reef and held the boat from drifting. Either because her eyes were becoming more accustomed to the gloom, or because it was growing a shade lighter, Joan could now faintly see the face of the man by her side. Once he put his hand lightly on her arm. Although it was only a message of reassurance, it disconcerted her. She knew that such an act at such a time was not intended as a caress, and was glad the darkness hid the flush that the slight touch of his hand had summoned to her cheeks. Curiously enough, she was not conscious of danger with Keith near, though danger there undoubtedly was. They were three miles from Tao Tao, with half a gale blowing, and enveloped by blackness which would make their safe return to the island a problem, for even if they had dared to strike a light they had no compass.

“Do — do you think anything can have hap-

pened to Peter Pan?" she asked at length, almost in a whisper.

"They can't have seen him, or we should have heard a shot," Keith replied. "I hope he doesn't delay too long, though, because the clouds are getting thinner, and if it grows light he won't be able to get anywhere near the schooner. Hark! What's that?"

As he spoke the moon shone through a sudden break in the clouds, and a hoarse cry came over the water from the opposite side of the reef.

"See! The schooner! The schooner!" Joan exclaimed excitedly. "It's drifting on to the reef!"

The cries on the imperilled craft were now redoubled. Above them Moniz's deep voice could be heard bellowing, and a yell of pain told its own story of some luckless black who had not jumped to obey orders quickly enough to please the Portuguese trader. Nearer and nearer the reef the vessel drifted. There was the creaking of blocks and tackle. A sail bellied against the sheen of the moon. A canvas cracked in the wind like a great whip.

"He's scraped out of it by the skin of his teeth," muttered Keith. "It was a near thing, though."

With straining sheets the schooner was now edging away from the threatening coral, back toward her old anchorage. The figure of Peter Pan appeared suddenly on the reef, and he scrambled into the whale-boat.

"Washee-washee!" Keith ordered. "Go plenty quiet!"

With as little sound as possible they made off, but they did not get far unobserved. Just as Moniz gave the order for his spare anchor to be dropped over, his eyes fell on the boat. Up to that moment he had attributed the parting of the cable to a flaw, but now he realized that it had been cut.

With an oath Moniz reached for a rifle, and half a dozen shots flew in the direction of the whale-boat. He could not hope to make a hit in the half-darkness, but it relieved his feelings somewhat to pump lead after the retreating enemy.

"Washee-washee!" Keith cried again, and the whale-boat shot over the dark waters at racing speed until it was out of range.

"That brute has the devil's own luck," he said after a few minutes. "Number two trick goes to him. Never mind. It may be our turn next. Sorry to have kept you out of bed for nothing, Miss Trent."

In spite of their nocturnal adventure, however, neither of them slept late next morning, for they expected Chester Trent to return soon after dawn; and with his return would come the prospect of a battle royal for the reef. But there was no sign of the ketch, and Moniz was making figurative hay while the sun shone. They were still waiting when nightfall came. Keith had kept an eye on

the plantation workers, who had been busy, in their own lethargic fashion; but the knowledge that Moniz was poaching without let or hindrance made Keith wince. He felt no anxiety about Chester's absence. To-day is generally considered as good as to-morrow or yesterday in the South Seas, and one rarely keeps any appointment there, except with death. It was noon on the next day before the unexpected happened. Sailing gracefully as a bird into the bay beneath the bungalow came Moniz's schooner, with a white sheet fluttering from her peak.

After his first shock of amazement Keith laughed in a queer way.

"What do you think of that!" he said to the girl who was by his side. "That dago will never go under for lack of cheek. Here he comes with a flag of truce!"

Joan frowned.

"What on earth can he want?" she said.

"The Lord only knows! We can't shoot under the circumstances, though I haven't the slightest doubt that's what he would do if the positions were reversed. Come, we'll meet the gentleman on the beach and hold a pow-wow."

"I'd rather hold a pow-wow with a rattler!" Joan declared, but she went with Keith.

The schooner luffed up in the deep water close to the shore, anchored, and sent off her small boat.

Two blacks were pulling, and presently Keith got his first close view of Moniz. The trader jumped out immediately the little craft touched the beach, and advanced toward Joan and her companion with a wide sweep of his helmet. He was well built, and good-looking in a saturnine fashion, with piercing black eyes, swarthy skin, and a black beard neatly trimmed. As he replaced his hat he threw away the end of a cigarette and instantly began to roll another, which in turn was followed by a third and fourth as fast as its predecessor was consumed.

"I come on a friendly errand, Miss Trent," he said with a deferential bow. Moniz spoke excellent English, with but a trace of accent.

The girl gave a swift glance toward Keith, as though relying upon him to negotiate a difficult matter.

"The last few messengers you've sent weren't particularly friendly," Keith replied sharply. "Two of them went through my boat and one stuck into one of our niggers."

Moniz gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"Somebody very carelessly cut the cable of my schooner while she was near a weather shore the other evening," he said almost reproachfully.

"I hope I am betraying no confidence when I say it is a pity the schooner wasn't smashed on the reef," Keith declared without hesitation.

"Come, come," said Moniz, "need we quarrel? It can only lead to — to unpleasantness."

"It will, and there'll be a darned sight more unpleasantness if you don't keep away from that reef. We haven't started yet."

The trader raised his bushy eyebrows a trifle and turned to the girl.

"Your brother — he is not here? I came to speak to him."

"Anything you have to say to Mr. Trent you can say to me," Keith declared.

"But it is a matter of business."

"Well, I'm here to represent him for the present."

"When will he be back?"

"That's no affairs of yours. Listen, I'll give you five minutes to say what you have to say, and if you don't make yourself scarce then I'll throw you into the sea. Is that definite?"

Moniz pondered over the prospect long enough to take in Keith's height and bulk, and evidently decided there was uncompromising decision behind the threat. For the moment, however, he was a decided pacifist.

"I have been fishing for pearls," he said blandly, "and I believe we might all do very well if we worked together. I have not been altogether without success these last few days."

"You mean you've stolen some pearls," Keith

said with rising colour, his hands itching to get at the Portuguese.

“Ah, no, not pearls, exactly,” replied Moniz, unruffled. “There are seeds — most promising seeds. Somewhere near there pearls worth much money must be waiting. But it will take time to find them — time, skill and patience. We could work in — what shall I say — more comfort, if instead of shooting at one another we pooled our resources. I have been pearling before, and, if I may say so, my experience would be valuable. Also I have two excellent divers working for me, and skilled divers are not plentiful round here just now.”

“You mean you have two of our hands whom you filled with trade gin as a bribe to stop with you.”

“They can work for anyone they please,” retorted Moniz, still suave although conscious of the fact that he was making no headway. He was fully alive by now to the fact that whatever happened, this plain-spoken, forceful stranger was a power to reckon with in his negotiations. If he could be placated it might put a different complexion on matters. “I will not detain those divers if they wish to join you again,” he went on. “There has been a misunderstanding all through, I fear. Mr. Trent is hot-headed. I made a fair business offer to him, and we might both have been better off

had he accepted it but — ” he shrugged his shoulders — “ he lost his temper. You know what that sort of thing means here in the South Seas. I am not a man of violence, but one must look after one’s self.”

“ That’s just our point,” said Keith tersely. “ We’re looking after ourselves, and here’s another thing — we don’t need your assistance in doing it.”

“ It need never have come to violence — ” Moniz began.

“ No, unless you had started the shooting,” Keith interrupted. “ You damned scoundrel, the first day you went out to the reef you started your gun play when Miss Trent was there. Your five minutes is up, and what you have to say doesn’t interest us. Get out of this.”

Moniz showed his white teeth in a broad smile, made another sweeping bow to Joan, and rowed back to the schooner.

“ Don’t you acknowledge that I was right,” the girl asked, “ when I said he wasn’t to be trusted? ”

“ I doubt whether the devil will trust him with a coal shovel when the time comes,” Keith declared.

“ Thank goodness you were here,” Joan said. “ He always gives me an uncomfortable feeling as though he were trying to get behind me and stab me in the back.”

“ Well, he’s a cool customer! Look there! If he isn’t making a bee-line for the reef again! ”

There was something so unexpected about this that they both burst out laughing.

"Let him go on in peace for the present," Joan said. "If it is true that he is only finding seeds he isn't doing much harm. By the way, do you believe that?"

"I think for once he spoke the truth," Keith said. "He's like a tiger that's tasted blood, though, and he wants as much more as he can get. If he'd found anything big he wouldn't have been so desperately anxious to let us in on it."

For a while Keith forgot Moniz and the pearls. The problem of putting the plantation in order was quite sufficient to keep him busy for the moment, and the blacks needed firm handling. More than a thousand young trees on the western side of the island had been uprooted in the storm, and many of these could be saved with judicious handling. Taleile, however, was no optimist. He was willing enough to see that the orders of the new "white marster" were carried out, but he was woefully lacking in enthusiasm.

"Him no good," he would say from time to time, shaking his head, and turning his eyes to Keith as if appealing to him for confirmation. Taleile's experience on other plantations had made him an expert of sorts. He had many times tried to show Chester Trent that much of the land was not worth the trouble of working. He knew well enough

that only on certain parts of the Tao Tao were the trees showing a passable promise of good returns, but Trent had turned a deaf ear to all such protestations, misjudging Taleile's judgment and expecting nature to perform miracles. Chester's knowledge of planting, apart from what he had picked up on Tao Tao, was limited to what he had learnt on an Englishman's place at Loruna, three hundred miles to the west of Tao Tao. Having absorbed a rudimentary idea of the work in a year spent at Loruna, he had taken this island of his own and sunk the remainder of his capital in the enterprise. At first youthful enthusiasm had carried him a long way toward making something of a success of it. That there were very decided limitations to the possibilities of planting on Tao Tao, however, was painfully apparent to Keith.

"What's the matter, you disgruntled old heathen," he said when Taleile's pessimism was beginning to irritate him. "What for you say him no good, eh?"

The black poked a stick into the shallow hole where an uprooted two-year-old tree had stood, and showed that there were but a few inches of soil.

"Him plenty soon blow down again," he said. "Him plenty soon die."

"Well, stick him up and let him die if he wants to," snapped Keith sharply.

It was not Chester Trent's troubles on the subject

of Tao Tao, however, that made him thoughtful as he walked slowly back toward the bungalow that evening. He told himself that this was no concern of his anyway, and yet he was vaguely troubled. There were plenty of plantations within a figurative stone's throw of the equator that were going to ruin from a variety of causes, and he was no more perturbed on their account than he was at the thought of the number of cross-eyed Chinamen in Peking who were suffering from dyspepsia. But Joan Trent had centred her hopes on Tao Tao. Joan had immolated herself there for four long years in the hope that it was going to prove a fine, paying concern. Joan was giving the best years of her life helping her brother to run a plantation which even an ignorant, kinky-haired cannibal summed up as "no good." True, the kinky-haired cannibal was only speaking of it as "no good" in a comparative sense; but the fairest gem of the South Seas was not good enough a setting for Joan. These were the thoughts which were chasing one another through his brain when he emerged from the avenue of palms leading to the bungalow and saw the girl standing on the veranda, with her hands resting lightly on the rail. She had let down the coils of her hair which streamed like burnished copper in the breeze. Her head was poised a little on one side as she gazed out to sea. Keith stood, breathless, for a few moments; and then, like a

jangling, discordant note in his brain, a picture of the cabin in the *Four Winds* as he had last seen it, flashed before him. A curious, dull ache crept into his heart as he went forward and greeted her.

CHAPTER IX

KEITH IS PUZZLED

THE little alarm clock, that did general duty as a time piece in the bungalow, pointed to ten o'clock that night when the *querk querk* of a horn came over the water.

"That's the *Kestrel*!" said Joan, jumping up.

Keith had some misgivings on the subject of Chester Trent, but they were dispelled as soon as the planter leaped from the boat.

"Hope you weren't scared, sis," he said, with a brotherly peck on her cheek. "I had the deuce of a job getting back. The wind was dead wrong all the way, but I've brought three ripping divers with me. What's the news?"

"Moniz is calmly sitting on your reef," the girl announced.

"The devil he is!"

Keith explained briefly what had happened, and Chester nodded slowly.

"There'll be a shindy to-morrow," he said. "I haven't been all the way to Borenda for divers just for the pleasure of looking at 'em. And he had the infernal impudence to come to Tao Tao for a pow-

wow, eh! You did quite right, Keith. By the way, I wonder —" his voice trailed off.

"What?" Joan asked.

"Moniz said he hadn't found anything much. He's a natural born liar, but maybe he didn't."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Keith.

"You never can tell with a wily chap like that," Chester declared. "Isn't it just as possible that he struck lucky and thought he'd try to make sure of getting in on the ground floor, for a share of the rest of the pearls there?"

"Maybe," Keith agreed, "but it doesn't cut any ice so far as we're concerned. Our real business with the brute starts in the morning. After that the reef is likely to be exclusively his or ours."

But the morrow brought the unexpected. While the trio were at breakfast, making deliberate plans for the coming fight, the bird-like schooner, fluttering a white sheet once more, dropped anchor in the bay. Keith, facing the window, saw it first, and, in sheer surprise held his coffee cup in mid-air for ten seconds before he spoke. Then he laughed.

"I wonder if he'll expect to be invited to breakfast!" he exclaimed. "Really, nothing that man did would surprise me."

The Portuguese came ashore and climbed up the path to the house with as much assurance as though he owned it. Chester Trent, going to the door, met him with an expression that was none too cordial.

"I think we should be better off as friends than enemies, Mr. Trent," Moniz said.

"What do you want now?" Chester demanded.

"I saw the ketch was back," the Portuguese said, with a wave of the hand in the direction of the *Kestrel*, "and I came to ask you to listen to reason."

"Mr. Keith did the listening for me yesterday," the planter replied bluntly, "and if I understand him aright he gave you your answer."

Moniz muttered something in Portuguese which sounded like an oath. He gave a savage glance toward Keith, who had joined the others on the veranda, and pitched the end of a cigarette over the rail with an ill-tempered flick. For a moment he was on the verge of losing his temper, but with an effort he regained control of it.

"Mr. Trent, we were friends till this Yankee gentleman came here," he said with a forced smile. "We could still do good business together if you would join me in this little enterprise."

"Excuse me, my breakfast is getting cold," Chester said, turning on his heel. "I have no more to say to you."

He went indoors abruptly. Keith and Moniz, left alone on the veranda, glared at one another. The trader hated this big interloper heartily, and Keith, though not conscious of hatred, thoroughly disliked and distrusted the Portuguese. Had the situation been much more strained they would prob-

ably have flown at each other there and then. It needed but a match to the gunpowder. Physically they were fairly evenly matched. The sailor had the advantage of height by an inch, with thew and muscle hardened like steel. Moniz's shoulders were massive, and he had a peculiarly long reach; but though he lacked the sheer power of the man before him, he was quick as a cat in every movement, he had the sinew of a horse, and he possessed the grim, relentless determination which carries a man beyond his normal breaking-point when it comes to a life and death struggle.

While a swift flood of emotion weltered through their minds, each was oblivious of everything save the presence of the other. Suddenly, with a ghost of a smile flickering about his lips — a smile that was meant to taunt and goad — Moniz descended the steps, but at the bottom turned to ask with a sneer:

“Did you fall off that ship, or did they throw you overboard?”

Keith clenched his hands and for a moment did not move. A sudden pallor swept over his face. For a second time on Tao Tao a vision of the *Four Winds* flashed vividly before him. The scene in the captain's cabin as his eyes had last fallen upon it came to him in minute detail.

Then he strode down the steps quickly with a set face.

"If I lose my temper I may hurt you," he said.
"Take my advice and clear out."

Moniz laughed tauntingly.

"The sea washed up a nice thing when you came here, didn't it?" he said. "Dropped into a soft billet, eh? Better than peeling potatoes at sea!" There was a dangerous glitter in Keith's eyes which the trader might have taken as a warning, but he owed the interloper a very large grudge, and was revelling in the opportunity of working it off. "You took good care to stop here to look after the girl when her brother wasn't around, didn't you?" he added. "Maybe you have nice time, eh?"

Without hesitation Keith bunched his fist and shot it straight from the shoulder to the point of the trader's jaw. Had Moniz not misjudged his man he would have had time to ward off or parry the blow, but his attempt to guard was a fraction of a second too late. Keith's fist landed home with scientific precision and the force of a battering ram.

A look of intense and pained amazement spread over Moniz's face as his spine received the jolt, and then he fell backward like a log. Keith glanced at the prone form, and then stalked back to the veranda. Chester and his sister were still indoors, and had seen nothing of the scuffle, for which Keith was glad. He was mounting the steps of the veranda when Moniz scrambled to his feet, and, nursing his chin with one hand and shaking the other,

called: "You pig of a Yankee! I'll get even with you for this!"

Still muttering curses, he walked down the path to the beach, and climbed aboard his boat. Keith watched until the Portuguese pushed off, and then he entered the bungalow where Chester was busy again with his interrupted breakfast.

"Come along before the coffee goes cold," Chester said lightly. "Never let a little thing like that interfere with your meals in the South Seas. Why, man, you look worried about something. Forget it, and sit down."

Keith sat down, but he was far from forgetting what had happened.

"I am worried," he said. "Moniz knows that when I came to Tao Tao I swam here."

"Well, what of it?"

"Why, nothing much, but for the life of me I don't see how he found it out."

Keith did not say so, but his chief concern was how much the Portuguese had learnt, and not how he had learnt it.

"Why shouldn't he?" Chester asked, helping himself to another fried plantain. "There's no secret about it. Every nigger on the place must know it, and niggers will talk."

"Well, for instance, which niggers?" Keith said. "Think a minute."

"There are two of my divers he collared. I've

no doubt they opened their mouths about everything on the island."

"They may have told him all he wanted to know about your affairs," observed Keith, "but, if you recollect, I came here after they had gone with you to Tamba."

Chester frowned.

"Umph!" he exclaimed. "That's right. Now, how the devil —"

"Exactly. Moniz hasn't had a chance to talk to any of our fellows since I arrived here."

"That's deuced odd! Are you sure he knew?"

"He knew something about it. I had gotten his goat and he wanted to make me mad, so he asked me whether I'd fallen off the steamer or been thrown off."

Chester was biting the end from a cigar reflectively.

"Miracles don't happen these days," he observed. "Maybe it was just a lucky shot of his. He knew you couldn't have dropped out of the clouds or jumped off a motor 'bus. But from the way he put it he seems to have understood that you didn't land here in a boat."

"It doesn't matter much, anyway," Keith said, "but I'm convinced he knew exactly how I landed; and as neither of us has told him, it must have been one of the blacks."

"Moniz knows a little too much about our affairs

for my liking," said Joan. "It would not surprise me in the least to hear that he has one of our hands here in his pay."

"It may be Isa, the diver who didn't stop at Tamba when the other two deserted," Chester declared. "I've suspected something of the sort all the time. He's a wicked-looking brute, with his one eye. The other got poked out while he was having a fight, and I'll bet it was no more than he deserved. He's a wonderful chap at pearling, and for that reason I was glad he didn't go over to Moniz, but we've got to watch him."

"Still," said Keith, "I don't see how Isa could have got in touch with Moniz. It's twenty miles from here to Tamba, and even a nigger would jib at swimming that distance, because the currents are tricky among these islands."

"There isn't a boat on Tao Tao that Isa could have managed by himself, so he never rowed across," Chester put in.

"True. But he could swim out to the reef, couldn't he?" said Joan. "Moniz was there several nights, you know, and a three-mile swim would mean nothing to a man like Isa."

"That's a likely explanation, sis," the girl's brother agreed, "providing Isa is the culprit. I don't quite see what Moniz's game is, but I don't like to feel so much treachery around. Next thing we shall have all the niggers murdering us in our

sleep and Moniz swooping down to collar everything he can find."

The two men exchanged glances. They were each thinking of the encounter Keith had had in the night — an encounter which might well have ended in the murder of one, if not two of their party. By mutual consent they had said nothing to the girl about it.

"Chester, see!" Joan exclaimed. "I believe the schooner is heading back for Tamba."

The others were by her side in a moment, and it was with considerable relief that they found the girl was right. Going before a fair breeze, the vessel was leaving the reef on her port side and running in a direct line for the other island.

"He's quit cold!" Keith exclaimed. "And yet that's peculiar."

"Why worry?" said Chester, delightedly. "He's saved us the trouble of driving him off, that's all. One of us might have been plugged in the process, and though I don't mind a scrap when it's necessary, I confess I know lots of ways of enjoying myself better than dodging bullets."

"It looks as though he might have been telling the truth for once when he said he couldn't find any pearls at the reef," Keith observed. "And yet he knows enough about the game to be sure you can't expect to fish out a handful of pearls every day. I don't want to discourage you, but I suspect we may

hear something more of that gentleman before long."

"Wouldn't be surprised," replied Chester, "but the field is ours for the present, and I'm crazy to have another go at those oysters. Come along. Let's beat it. I shan't rest content until I've either found some more pearls where those two beauties came from, or else proved to my own satisfaction that they were the only ones there."

"It's impossible to say, until we've tried it out," Keith declared. "There's no accounting for the ways of the wily oyster. Wherever there is an oyster you may expect to find a pearl, even in a Manhattan cabaret, but you can't reckon on 'em a cent. You might spend a little fortune getting labour, and buying dredges and all sorts of paraphernalia, and scoop up every oyster within half a mile of the reef, and never find pearls enough to pay for one nigger's keep for a day. It's a baffling gamble."

"On the other hand—" said Chester, with a meaning laugh.

"Oh, yes, on the other hand you might blunder right into a pile of 'em. Don't I know it! Personally I think we shall have luck if we keep on. Any man who knows the first thing about pearling would tell you it would be flying in the face of Providence to leave that bed unsearched after you've got a couple of excellent specimens out of it. It's a funny

thing that neither you nor the Portuguese have had any success since the first go off, but that doesn't amount to much. Maybe you were within fifty feet of good ones all the time and never knew it. A matter of a yard or two in the depth of the water, or a difference in the temperature caused by the currents, sometimes makes all the difference."

"Well, we'll soon know now," said Chester. "Everything is ready, and I'm going to strike while the iron is hot. Hurry up, you two. We're going to spend the rest of this blessed day at the reef."

CHAPTER X

THE SHELL BANK

SPIRITS were high as preparations were made for the day's work, for apart from the fact that they were at least temporarily rid of Moniz, there was the glamour of the thing to attract them. There is a romance attached to pearling that never dies, and the gambling element of it has a subtle fascination. It is always the unknown, the uncertain in life that attracts the adventurous spirit; and the adventurous spirit was strong in all three members of the expedition.

The men were careful to see that they were well provided with arms and ammunition, in case of a sudden return by the trader, and it was still early in the forenoon when the *Kestrel* spread her sails to the breeze and glided across the limpid water toward the reef, with the whale-boat in tow.

"Going to try the same place?" Keith asked when they were approaching the spot.

"I think so," Chester replied. "For the present, at any rate. It was off the southern end of the reef that I found pearls the first time, and though I've been there since without success, that still seems to me the most likely place."

Soon the ketch was swinging to her anchor a couple of hundred feet off the coral, and Chester Trent's four divers were in the whale-boat, ready for business. A rough ladder had been swung at each side of the smaller craft, to facilitate climbing aboard from the sea. Even the divers seemed to be imbued with enthusiasm, which, however, may have been inspired partly by the promise of a bonus, which their employer had made. For each large pearl found, a reward of one plug of tobacco was to be paid. Exactly what was to constitute a "large" pearl was not determined, but Trent felt he could be magnanimously generous with plugs of tobacco if pearls worth a hundred dollars a-piece or more came rolling in. The divers, like savages the world over, were boisterously playful now that they were in a happy frame of mind. They laughed and indulged in horse-play, blissfully unconscious of the fact that a single pearl which they might fetch to the surface could be worth enough sheath-knives to sink the whale-boat, or indeed the whale-boat and the ketch together. As they tumbled over the side into the smaller craft one of them tripped a companion and, with the assistance of a brown hand placed in the small of the victim's back, sent him splashing into the green sea. But the men were nearly as much at home in the water as they were ashore. They swam like otters, dived as only a South Sea islander can dive, and but for the fact

that they had to come to the surface frequently to breathe, they were almost amphibious.

The water was about ten feet deep at the place where the boats lay, and so clear that every small object on the powdered coral and sand beneath was clearly visible from the surface. This, moreover, gave the water the appearance of being only about three feet deep, and those above were able to watch every movement of the divers at the bottom.

The shells did not lie in thick clusters, but were spread unevenly. For the most part they were large, many of them running to six and seven inches in length. The blacks remained below between thirty and sixty seconds at a stretch, according to their haul, and then came puffing and blowing to the surface with three or four shells which they dropped over the side of the whale-boat. Then, after recovering their breath and resting for a few minutes, they slid to the bottom again.

Work of this nature, by a white man untrained to the trick of holding his breath so long, would soon utterly exhaust him, but for the natives it was not work, as the white man understands the word. They went about their task with that air of indifference to time peculiar to tropical dwellers. They knew well enough that their employer placed some great value on the pearls, also he would not come from a great distance and pay them twelve English

shillings a month to grub along the bottom of the ocean for oysters; but their sense of values was hazy, and they did not bother their heads much about white men's motives. This, however, applied particularly to the three men Chester Trent had lately recruited; Isa, alone, was less simple in that respect, for he had intelligence, of a low order, and much cunning.

Little more than a raw cannibal though he was at heart, Isa had learnt much by the simple process of watching during the many years he had been a pearl diver. It was always the white man, never the black, who went to so much trouble, risked everything, aye and even fought, for these small round objects that were found in the oyster.

Twice in his life he had seen divers killed for disobeying the white man's rules about pearls. Once it was when a New Guinea native held up a pearl a little larger than usual in his wet fingers to examine it. It had a curious, pinkish hue. Isa had never seen one quite like it before nor since. The white man who was employing them shouted something, and the diver let the pearl slip out of his wet fingers. It fell over the side in rather deep water, and the white man crushed the diver's skull in with a crow-bar.

On the other occasion a black tried to steal one of the pearls, and he was shot dead on the spot.

Isa knew, therefore, that these pearls had a value to white men which was beyond the ordinary diver's comprehension.

If one is prospecting in fresh pearling grounds, and impatient, the oysters may be opened immediately they are brought to the surface and the contents examined. That is a slow, laborious operation, however, and once the pearlers have settled down to work they leave the shells to rot in the sun for a day or two before attempting to reap the harvest, for the valuable little objects are much more easily discovered then. Chester Trent had got over the feverish stage weeks before. So long as plenty of shell was raised he was well content to wait. Nor did Joan display any particular keenness. More than once she had been out with her brother while fishing was in progress, and moreover, her faith in pearling was but slight. It was different, however, with the man from the *Four Winds*. "Once a pearler always a pearler" is a saying one hears in the Pacific. It was long since Keith had leaned over the side of a boat watching the gliding forms of black men hunting for shell in which he was interested. The sight of it brought back something of his old ardour, and he pried open the shells one after another as they were flung into the whale boat, though his search was entirely without success. He laboured in this way for more than a couple of hours before his first enthusiasm wore off, and then,

catching sight of Joan, watching from the deck of the *Kestrel*, he joined her on the ketch.

"I fancy, as you have been as quiet as the grave all this time, you've not found your fortune yet," she said quizzically.

"Not yet," he replied. "You know, Miss Trent, one good pearl a day would amount to a fortune if we could keep it up for a while." There was the faintest trace of resentment in the way he spoke, and the girl was quick to notice it.

"I know how true that is, Mr. Keith," she said more seriously. "Please don't think of me as a wet blanket in this. You must remember that I have been all through it so often, and that nobody knows better than I how difficult it will be to regain lost ground once the plantation really begins to slide back. It is sliding now — it has been doing so far too long. Ever since I first came to the South Seas I have tried to regard myself as a sort of supernumerary, helping Chester in every way that lay in my power and checking him only when I really felt it necessary. Even now, though I strongly suspect this is all time and money wasted, I am not standing in Chester's way. His welfare is all that I — all that I think about."

Keith was watching a gull sailing in stately grace overhead, but though his eyes took in the creature's movements his mind was concerned with other things. He had been listening to the girl intently,

and his eyes dropped to hers when he noticed her slight hesitation in saying that Chester was all she thought about. Doubtless that was true—in a general way. Certainly she spared herself in no effort to help her brother.

But there were three of them on the island now. Keith felt sure his coming had made some difference. He knew that her thoughts were at least less concentrated on her brother now. That was only natural. Instinct, however, told him there was something more. Exactly how much more he did not even attempt to guess. Just as surely as he knew that was an oyster a diver was dropping into the whale-boat, did he know this girl and he had an attraction for one another. How much or how little she felt it he could not tell. He told himself that for her sake he hoped it was very little, for the memory of the *Four Winds* hung like a dark cloud about him. Of his own feelings, however, there was not the shadow of a doubt. She was—or could have been—the one woman in the world for him. Her voice, her smile, the scent of her hair, her eyes, all drew him with an intensity he had never known. As she stood there, with her head a trifle to one side—a little mannerism into which she fell when in particular earnest—he longed to gather her up in his arms and crush her to him, telling her that he loved her more than anything on earth, and always would love her.

"All — all that you think about!" he found himself saying aloud mechanically. The words came of their own accord. He could not have suppressed them had his life depended on it, though he condemned himself for his folly as soon as they were uttered.

Their eyes met for a moment questioningly and a faint tinge of colour dyed the girl's cheeks. But she answered unfalteringly, while Keith, his heart beating faster than usual, turned his gaze.

"Yes," said Joan, resting her elbows on the ship's rail, and looking down into the shimmering water. "You see, we grew up together, and I think there must be a closer bond existing between us than is usually the case with brother and sister. Perhaps if we had not come out here he might have married, and someone else would have looked after him, but as it is we are very dependent on one another."

Keith nodded. "Your brother seems to be regaining his grip on things," he said. "I mean, to put it frankly, he isn't drinking at all now."

"I believe that is largely due to your influence, Mr. Keith. You came when he was badly in need of a man friend. I don't know quite what might have happened but for your misfortune."

"Misfortune!"

"I mean in falling overboard."

For the space of twenty seconds Keith remained silent.

"My leaving the *Four Winds* in these waters was the best thing that could have happened, in more ways than one," he said slowly. "It—it wasn't very pleasant on that ship, especially toward the finish. But my greatest good fortune was drifting on to Tao Tao. If anyone has cause to be thankful, Miss Trent, it is I. You have been very good to me, you know. I appreciate it all more than I can say. It is—it is rather a rough life at sea, and one is inclined to become brutish after a long spell of it. If I have the good fortune to remain here many more weeks I may become almost civilized again!"

"You are not thinking of leaving the island just yet, I trust," Joan said with a little laugh.

"So far as I am concerned," he answered boldly, "the longer passenger traffic from this island is held up the better. Tao Tao comes nearer to my conception of an earthly paradise than anything I ever struck."

He broke off abruptly. This seemed the psychological moment for telling her that when he did go he might have to do so hurriedly. And yet it was not easy. All his life he had acted quickly, determinedly, grasping the nettle firmly when necessary. But now he hesitated. It was so easy to slide, and if he spoke of what was in his mind it might mean the end of this something more than

friendship which to Keith at least had become very dear.

“Miss Trent,” he began, irresolutely, “if ever —”

A triangular fin shot along the surface of the water by the side of the whale-boat, just as one of the divers scrambled over the side. A huge shark snapped at his leg as it disappeared, and then, with a vicious whisk of its powerful tail, swung off.

Isa, at that moment, came to the top, a dozen feet from the boat.

Two other dorsal fins appeared from nowhere, and the black diver, with a quick glance over his shoulder, saw death in a terrible form rushing toward him.

CHAPTER XI

DRAWN BLANK

A LOADED rifle lay on one of the hatches, near where Keith stood, and he reached for it quickly. In that moment, however, Isa had turned on his back and was splashing furiously with his legs, at the same time propelling his body toward the boat. The three other divers each took an oar and began to beat the surface. As suddenly as they appeared, the fins vanished below the surface, and a minute later Isa was nonchalantly getting into the whale-boat, uninjured. To him sharks were dangerous only if they were ignored. If he did not see one in time he would probably have a leg or an arm nipped off, but so far he had never been too late, and he had been swimming in shark infested waters for the greater part of his life.

With a horrified expression Joan had watched it all, every trace of colour gone from her face.

"If you two men insist on pearling," she said quietly as the black reached safety, "and if this sort of thing is likely to happen frequently, I shall stay ashore and attend to the more humble if less exciting duties of home. Sharks are my *bete noir*." The girl shuddered.

"They're nasty brutes," Keith agreed, "but they're cowards, fortunately. Besides, these niggers don't look on them in the same light that we do. Dozens of times I've seen blacks jump in and attack a shark with a knife for the fun of the thing. Sometimes they use a short stick, sharpened at both ends, and wait for the shark to turn over and open its mouth to make a grab. Then the nigger pushes the stick into its mouth and props the thing's jaws open with it. They have to be as quick as lightning, because Mr. Shark is moving just then about as fast as an express train and, being hungry, is in no mood to be fooled with. I must confess, though, it even gives me the creeps to watch that performance. You know it will be all right — that is to say, you expect it will; but if anything were to go wrong in the programme there'd be a nasty mess."

"I am quite sure I shouldn't like to watch such a thing at all," the girl replied. "It is risking life stupidly and unnecessarily."

"A good deal depends on one's point of view," Keith said. "After all, life itself is just as precious to a nigger in the most uncivilized corner of the earth as it is to an over-fed millionaire living in ease and luxury on Fifth Avenue. But the two of 'em look at things differently. The millionaire is a specialized sort of creature who has got to the point where making another million or so is the only thing that gives him any real pleasure. It's a joy,

of a kind, to him to do so, but he doesn't get as much real happiness out of it as the nigger does in gagging a shark with a stick. The trouble with people like the millionaire is that they have learnt to think too much about the safety of their own skins. They ought to go about under a glass case."

"I think I know what you mean," Joan said; "but it is entirely a man's viewpoint. I don't regard myself as especially mercenary, but if I were faced with the alternative of attacking a live shark in the water or doing something which would net a million dollars I should be inclined to go after the million!"

"Never having tried either, I can't say from experience," Keith laughed. "But it looks as though we were going to arrive no nearer being millionaires to-day. The sharks are thick now."

So far the divers had been unable to enter the water again, for within a hundred yards of the whale-boat a dozen or more triangular fins were visible. A regular school of sharks, attracted either by the men or arriving on the scene by chance, were darting about. For nearly half an hour the divers watched them unemotionally, as one would wait for a steam roller to get out of one's way in a city thoroughfare. The day was now well advanced.

"He no good dive again," Isa declared at last. "Him shark plenty hungry and no go."

The whale-boat was hauled alongside, and the ketch was soon beating her way back to the island.

"Never mind, we didn't do so badly," said Chester. "There must be pretty nearly half a ton of shell there, and if we get that amount up every day for a couple of weeks without coming across any more pearls it will be enough to convince me the game isn't worth the candle."

"That would be seven tons of shell without a pearl among 'em," commented Keith, shaking his head. "No, somehow I can't see that happening. We mayn't get enough to make it pay, but we are bound to find something."

"You are a couple of optimists," Joan declared, "and I only hope you are right. Meanwhile, Chester, suppose we plan things a little systematically."

"Go ahead, sis. What d'you suggest?"

"Well, to begin with, need the whole family go out there to the reef every day?"

"Certainly not," her brother replied. "His nibs here can boss up the niggers and keep you company while I attend to the fishing for a while."

"While you and Moniz start trying to murder each other on the reef?" said the girl, with her eyebrows raised.

"I don't think you need bother your head too much about Moniz," Chester said. "To begin with, he's a longish way off, and if he came buzzing round

I should see him in plenty of time. But somehow I don't think he will return at present. He hasn't had it all his own way, you know."

"And maybe he thinks we're on a fool's errand anyhow," Keith put in. "If he should want to put up another fight, though, you've got your Kanakas armed."

"Promise me you won't get yourself killed," the girl said to Chester.

"I hereby solemnly promise," the planter declared, patting her shoulder affectionately. "Now are you all ready to go ashore? This is where we drop the hook."

The shell was spread on a sunny ledge, and, at Joan's request, not too near the house, for oysters in a state of decay make singularly unpleasant neighbors. It takes two or three days for them to "ripen" satisfactorily, and by that time one is well advised to keep to windward, for this is the unpoetic part of pearling.

After breakfast the following day Chester again put off to the reef, and a regular routine was established. Keith, with years of experience at sea, had learnt the way of handling men of nearly every shade and disposition, and with the assistance of Taleile, the "boss boy," he soon had his crew of blacks settled down to hard work, or rather work which they considered hard. Excepting during the mid-day spell of rest, they were kept steadily at it

from the moment when the bell on the veranda fetched them from their quarters, to the time when it sounded again at nightfall. Keith and the planter had put their heads together and decided exactly what labor had better be tackled first. The prospect was not an encouraging one, and Keith had grave doubts whether such chaos could be reduced to order and financial success, but he was determined not to allow the difficulties to dishearten him. He soon found that the first important step was to imbue Taleile with a little more enthusiasm, and the simplest way of doing this was by bribing that kinky-haired individual with tobacco. When the "boss boy" realized that he could smoke to his heart's content from dawn till night providing he made his crew hustle, he fell in with the arrangement joyously, though the crew did not appreciate it.

Keith did not find it necessary to spend the whole of his time actively supervising the work. Half a dozen times a day he made his rounds, cast his eyes over what was being done, and made a few suggestions to Taleile. The rest of the time he put in doing odd jobs about the place, such as repairing the copra sheds, some of which badly needed it; and incidentally he spent a good many hours with Joan.

Chester's second day at the reef was uneventful. The weather held good, and well over half a ton

of shell was added to the decaying mass on the ledge. At length, when the first haul was "ripe," Chester and Keith began the task of sifting the contents of the shell for pearls. A cloth was stretched across the top of a bucket, and on it each gaping oyster was placed separately, water being allowed to trickle over it. Trying though the task was to their olfactory nerves, it had its exciting side, for there was always the possibility that any shell might give up a pearl worth a considerable sum. The two men worked steadily, almost in silence, for hours. Not even a "seed" rewarded their efforts.

"Never mind — better luck to-morrow," said Chester at last. He had scarcely expected to come across a rich find, but, like the gold prospector who goes on doggedly in the wilds panning mother earth for months and never finding what he seeks, he was spurred on by the unquenchable hope which alone keeps men striving to wrest from nature such elusive substances as gold, diamonds and pearls that, when found, unlock the gates of civilization, comfort and pleasure.

For some obscure reason Moniz caused no further trouble at that time. Keith and the planter often speculated as to the cause, but they were unable to come to any conclusion. Either the Portuguese had learnt his lesson, and was leaving them severely alone because he was afraid, or he was biding his time and getting ready for some sudden *coup*. In

the former alternative Chester and Keith had little faith. Moniz was a thoroughly unprincipled black-guard, as devoid of scruples as he was soft-tongued when it suited his purpose to be so, but he was not of the kind who allow physical fear to stand in the way of their desires. His very mode of life proclaimed the fact that he was no coward. But he was too clever to run risks unnecessarily when he might achieve the same object by subtle means. The white inhabitants of Tao Tao were relieved at finding he paid them so little attention, but they never lost sight of the fact that he was a brooding menace. The only consolation they had — if consolation it could be called — was that if Moniz was by some means receiving reports concerning the doings on Tao Tao, there had been no rush of good fortune there to tempt him to adopt desperate measures.

The weeks glided by, and Keith settled down to the *dolce far niente* of island life in the South Seas. The work on the plantation proceeded apace. The man from the *Four Winds* calculated that if they kept at it in the same manner for another twelve months, and the fruits of their labour were not destroyed by the devastating hurricanes which sweep across those waters periodically, Tao Tao might begin to give promise as a plantation. It would never be a first-rate paying concern, however, because the soil was not only of an inferior quality, but it had not sufficient depth in many places. The

pearling, unfortunately, looked most unpromising. On an average, the ketch had been out to the reef three days out of every four, and a considerable area at the southern end of the reef had been cleared of shell. But the results had been extremely poor. A quantity of seed pearls had been taken, small enough objects in themselves, but not without commercial value if found in sufficient quantity. They do not realize a very high price, however, for they can only be used, after being calcined, for certain trade purposes. They are reduced to powder for *chuman*, and used with betel nut as a masticatory in some parts of the world. But seeds alone would not repay a pearler for the trouble of getting them, and there was little else that had come Chester Trent's way, excepting baroques — irregular shaped things of nacreous matter formed round some rough object that had been an unwelcome intruder in the oyster's home. Chester's total "catch" since Keith landed on Tao Tao did not include more than half a dozen baroques of extremely doubtful value. Nothing but hope and grim obstinacy kept him at his task in face of such miserable results. Joan, still determined not to interfere in any way, but to let him satiate himself with disappointment if necessary, did not again suggest that the project be abandoned. Keith, on the other hand, continually encouraged him, though in doing so he was conscious of displeasing the girl.

Once, when the planter had been caught by a severe squall off the reef, and he and his Kanakas had had to battle for hours in a tempestuous sea before regaining their anchorage just beneath the bungalow, Chester began to show the first signs of being disheartened.

"It looks to me as though the two pearls I found first were just a lucky chance," he declared. "If this goes on much longer I'm afraid I shall have to give it up."

The two men were sitting on the veranda, smoking, after a belated evening meal.

"Give it another month's trial, anyway," Keith urged. "Fate plays funny tricks on you while you're pearling. Shift your ground a bit. You may have better luck elsewhere."

"I have shifted it," Chester replied. "I'm getting shell now off the northwest of the reef, and maybe that may pan out better."

"I remember once," said Keith, "and not so very long ago either, there was a man called Ellis started pearling at an island named Teipui in the New Hebrides. He was a trader, and there wasn't much about the South Seas that fellow didn't know. As a rule a trader in these parts is a natural born crook, otherwise he wouldn't be able to do much business. But Ellis was as straight as a die. I've known him for a good many years, and I've never heard any man dare to suggest that he would lie or

cheat. He used to have prayers on board and try to teach the niggers to join in the hymns, and he was in deadly earnest about it, though he wasn't particularly tactful, because he'd as soon biff a Kanaka on the head with a marline spike as not if he wasn't taking his doses of religion regularly. There wasn't a cent's worth of cant in his composition. He believed in hell fire after death for the wicked, and a punch on the jaw for the living if they scoffed at things religious they didn't understand. Oh, you may smile, Trent, but you find 'em like that sometimes. They have to let off steam somehow, and if it's a choice between rum and religion give me the religious skipper every time. I've shipped with both, and I know.

"Well, Ellis had tried all sorts of games to make a living, and he was having a pretty thin time as a trader, when he took a flier at pearling off Teipui. He hit on the thing more or less by accident, but it was the luckiest accident that ever happened to him. He got two hundred and twenty-three pearls inside six weeks, and then sailed off to Sydney to turn 'em into ready. They realized enough to keep him in comfort for the rest of his days, and when an Australian who knew him offered to give him a thousand pounds for the secret of where he'd been fishing, Ellis snapped at it. He took the Australian out to Teipui, and after the man had seen some more pearls of the same kind found under

his eyes he weighed out the thousand pounds.

"Ellis sailed off to Sydney, and the Australian met him there a year later, darn nearly down and out. He'd scooped up shell for six months and never got pearls enough to keep a mouse in cheese. If the Australian hadn't actually seen the niggers fetch up oysters containing pearls of course he'd have thought it was a plant, and there would have been some brisk shooting as likely as not. Old man Ellis kind of fretted about it — felt as though he'd sold a gold brick to a pal. Inside a week he'd fitted out a fresh expedition and taken the Australian off to Teipui, again, making him a partner. When they got there they started fishing within a hundred feet of the old spot, and the first day they got up a regular whopper — a black pearl, it was, worth a lot of money. They kept on working there for several months until the bed was fished out, and they made nearly enough money in that time to buy up a bank.

"So you see," Keith went on, refilling his pipe, "the only certain thing about it is that it's darn uncertain."

"It certainly is — uncertain," Chester agreed, "especially round about our reef. Maybe I'll give it another month, though. But if nothing comes of it I shall just be about dead broke by then."

CHAPTER XII

ON THE BEACH

“**D**’YOU know, Miss Trent, I always had a kind of notion that when I died if ever I went to Paradise it would cloy after a while,” Keith said. “But since I’ve lived on Tao Tao I’ve changed my opinion. I think I’ve been happier here than I ever was.”

He was lying full length on the sand not far from the bungalow, his head propped up on his elbows and his eyes gazing out on the sea he loved. The girl was sitting idly, within a few feet of him. The day had been ideal, a refreshing breeze tempering the heat. The atmosphere was so clear that one could almost have discerned the bare topmast of a vessel vanishing beneath the horizon. The sun, glinting among the light ripples, had changed the water to a mass of glittering diamonds that dazzled the eyes. Three miles off lay the ketch near the reef, where Chester was busy, as usual. Keith could distinguish figures moving about her deck. Just visible above the edge of the sea, was the island of Tamba, mysterious but robbed of its threatening memories in the golden sunlight. And,

like the most perfect spot in the South Seas, Tao Tao nestled amid the glistening ocean. Far away, on the west side of the island, the surf was singing its perpetual song, a never-ending, sonorous boom which, though those who heard it hardly noticed the sound after a while, was nevertheless music in their ears that they would have missed.

"It certainly is peaceful here, if nothing else," replied Joan. "I am so glad for your sake that you have not found it too monotonous."

Keith smiled, and picking up a pebble, threw it into the sea.

"I s'pose, like when the elevator cable breaks, it all depends what sort of a life you have been leading," he said. "I'm twenty-seven years old now, Miss Trent. I ran away to sea when I was sixteen, and there has been mighty little of the placid side of life squeezed into those eleven years. That—that makes it all the more enjoyable now, you see."

The girl looked around, interested. It was the first time he had mentioned his age; she had taken him for a year or two older, partly because of the tinge of grey over his temples. Nor, indeed, had he ever spoken, except vaguely, of his early days.

"Sixteen!" she said. "At that time I had arrived at the age when I first insisted on having my hair up. I was twelve. Why, you began the battle of life when I was almost a baby. Did you stick to the sea after that?"

“On and off, yes,” Keith replied. “Mostly on, though. But I very nearly quit as soon as my first ship touched port. She was an old-fashioned square-rigger — you didn’t see many like her in those days, and they’re a curiosity now. She was bound from Boston to Galveston, and the Lord only knew where else. I’d been living with an old uncle on the Massachusetts coast, and when he died suddenly it left me stranded. His wife was an unamiable shrew, and I guessed it couldn’t be worse anywhere than being left with her, so I made up a bundle and started looking for a ship. But they seemed to have all the boys they wanted. While I was on the wharf I ran into a chap about my age who had signed on the *Mary S. Billings*, and when I told him about my difficulties he helped me to stow away. I went aboard at night and hid among some stores until we were at sea. When they found me I got such a leathering that I knew my aunt didn’t even know the rudiments of hitting a fellow. Then they put me to work. It was a hard school, and the Yankee skipper was a brute, but I learned discipline among other things, and after all I don’t know that the experience did me any harm, though I wished I was dead many a time then. The other boy told me he was going to skip the ship at Galveston, and so I stayed on and took his job. We went as far as New Zealand and Yokohama before returning to Boston, and by the time I left the ship

I was pretty well big enough to stand up for myself. As that was the only trade I knew anything about I remained a shellback."

"And you don't regret it?"

"Why, no, Miss Trent. It isn't the life I'd bring a son of mine up to, but it helps you to see something of the world, and it has a fascination all its own. Two or three times I've tried to break away from the sea, but I always drifted back to it. Once I was a conductor on a trolley car in New York, and I did some rough work on railroad construction in Vancouver for a while. I nearly made good once about six years ago, after being wrecked on the coast of South Africa, near Durban. I met a man from New Hampshire who wanted me to go into partnership with him in a store up in Zululand. He knew something of the country and could palaver with the niggers there a good bit, and as I had a little money I went in with him. We got a lot of stuff, such as red flannel and magenta shirtwaists, and trekked into the interior, where we built a shack and did a thriving trade. At the end of six months I could see that a few years of it would put me on velvet for the rest of my days, but one night a Kaffir set fire to the place, and we lost every blessed thing we possessed, so I went back to the sea."

"Couldn't you have started the store again?" the girl asked.

Keith shook his head.

"It's the same thing in every place, whether Zululand or Broadway — you can't do business without capital. Anyway, I was only about twenty-one, and you can't see very far beyond your nose at that age. Besides, there are lots of things I'd have missed if I had stayed in Africa — being here, for instance," he said smiling.

"Then really we owe your Kaffir a debt of gratitude," she replied with a twinkle in her eyes.

"I do, though I never knew it before," observed Keith. "The last I saw of him he was running across the veldt as though the devil himself was after him. It's queer on what little things our whole lives hinge sometimes. Ridiculous though it sounds, I don't suppose I should be here now but for the fact that one of that nigger's goats fell sick. He went to an *umtakati* — that's a Zulu witch-doctor — and asked him to cure the animal. The witch-doctor had his knife into us because we had put some of the natives wise to the fact that he was an old fraud, so he told the nigger the only way to remove the curse from the goat was to burn our store down. The funny part was that the *umtakati*, tickled to death about it, sent us a message telling how he'd worked the thing. And I'm blessed if the Kaffir's goat wasn't as fit as a fiddle immediately afterwards."

He spoke of his ups and downs lightly enough,

as though he were relating the experiences of someone else, whose cares were nothing to him. Indeed, Joan had noticed, ever since Keith arrived at Tao Tao, that there had been a gradual change creeping over him. At first he was preternaturally serious, and there was a hard look about his mouth which only relaxed in rare moments of merriment. Nowadays he was becoming more human. The careworn expression flitted across his face like a shadow at odd moments, as when he was gazing out into the unknown, over and beyond the horizon, but it vanished as quickly as it came. Joan never tried to peer under that mask of gloom which dropped over his face at times. His thoughts were his exclusive property, even as hers were her own. There were times when she wondered vaguely what memories of the past conjured such dark thoughts up in this strong man's brain. At first it had crossed her mind that some separation, enforced by his remaining on the island, had something to do with it, but that seemed less likely when he settled down there in apparent contentment. He never even expressed a desire to go to Tamba, there to wait for the possible appearance of a vessel, which was more likely than at Tao Tao, for there were several plantations on Tamba, and half a dozen schooners dropped anchor there in the course of a year, on the lookout for cargo. Joan felt instinctively, moreover, that

if it were a girl his thoughts wandered to, a man of Keith's type would have said something about her.

He fished in his pocket for a pipe and filled it slowly, as though his mind was not on the task.

"It's a funny thing," he said at length, applying a match to the bowl, "but though some of us go chasing all over the world for money, we rarely have any very clear idea what we want that money for. I don't mean the money we earn for the common necessities of existence, such as shoe-leather and food. We all have to think of that, more or less. But most of us cherish a hope at the back of our brain that somehow, somewhere, we shall run into a fortune. I suppose pleasures such as automobiles and theatres are the dominating motive in the majority of people who are looking for a pile, and such things are all right as far as they go, but they're an intangible sort of happiness to be aiming at. It seems to me that during the last month or two I've been developing more settled convictions on the subject of worldly possessions than I ever had before. Of course I'd like to make a fortune. Any sensible fellow would. But for the first time in my life I'm beginning to see that it isn't the fortune itself that counts so much as the idea of having a definite object in front of one all the time."

"It must be very much more satisfactory to have

something to aim at," Joan observed, "because after all money is only a means to an end."

"Exactly. Now, I don't in the least anticipate that the heavens will ever open and shower gold down on me," said Keith, "but if they do I shall settle down and finish with roving."

"But I do not think inactivity would appeal to a man of your kind long."

"Good heavens, no!" Keith declared. "I'd go crazy if all I had to do was to count my fingers and read novels. No, my mind is made up on that point. I should buy a farm somewhere back in Maryland, and keep dogs and horses and chickens and pigs. Maybe a practical farmer who had to make a living at the same game would have a fit if he knew how much my farm was costing me every year, but I should be working for pleasure and not for profit, and my object would be to improve the breed of pigs and horses and chickens. I was down in Maryland about eighteen months ago and I saw a place being run by a chap on those very lines. He told me he'd spent twenty years making his fortune by selling pills to relieve a pain in the back, and now his own back ached every day in the week excepting Sundays, with honest farm work, which seemed to tickle his sense of humour."

"You would have a longing at times to feel a deck heaving under you, and smell tarred rope once more," said Joan.

"Maybe," the man agreed, smiling as he puffed contentedly at his pipe. "And when I felt that way I'd step on to a heaving deck and smell the tarred rope, but there's a mighty big difference between doing it for pleasure and doing it for a living in all kinds of weather. Make no mistake about it, Miss Trent, the fascination of the sea comes from the sea itself, and God's fresh air, and not from shinning up the rigging when the thermometer says ten below zero, and tearing at frozen canvas till your fingers bleed, or having to drive a bunch of dago land-lubbers, that don't know a cleat from a cathead, when something has gone wrong and you're drifting straight on to the rocks."

"But surely, Mr. Keith, there is something fine in having done those things. The magnificent traditions of the sea which have been handed down to us would never have been magnificent unless there were great obstacles to overcome in the creation of them."

"Aye, the sea makes or breaks a man, and she doesn't care which. And if you have red blood in your veins, the worse she treats you the more you love her, so long as you have two arms and two legs to carry on with. It is fine, beyond a doubt, but that isn't going to make me say I wouldn't settle down on my farm if ever I was lucky enough to get the chance."

He was looking at her profile as he spoke —

looking hungrily, and wondering all the time whether heaven itself could contain such joy as would be his if, having fought for, and won a fortune, he could share it with her as his wife. His love for her, or rather the stern repression of it, was becoming almost more than he could bear; and sometimes he wondered gloomily whether it would not be best if he went away. He had the strength of will even to do that, though it would be a wrench greater than he liked to think about; he had wrestled with that problem in the silent watches of the night, however, and decided that it would be foolish, at any rate for the present, to run away from such happiness as the gods had strewn in his path.

A hat of white canvas shaded her head, but her hair hung over her shoulders in the two thick ropes in which she generally wore it, and the sun burnished its coppery hue. Her waist, turned in at the throat, allowed a glimpse of a neck of marble whiteness below the warm tan. Her lips were slightly parted, and her slender fingers were toying idly with the sand.

There was silence, save for the murmur of breakers, while the picture of Joan held the man spell-bound. The clock of eternity ticked off something like sixty seconds, but for these two time stood still.

Keith tried to speak, cleared his throat, moistened his lips and tried again.

"Well?" he said in a voice that he hardly recognized.

Joan glanced up at him with a secret smile, and then lowered her eyes as a faint flush mounted to her smooth cheeks.

"I, too, was counting my chickens," she replied lightly and yet shyly. And then: "Come," she continued, rising. "The *Kestrel* is nearly at her moorings, and Chester will be grumbling if his tea isn't ready in another five minutes."

CHAPTER XIII

PERILS SHARED

CHESTER, in spite of discouraging results, held firm in his determination to give the pearling another month's trial before abandoning it as useless. There were several days on which it was impossible to go to the reef owing to a southerly gale, and during that time he "cleaned up" all the shell that remained on the drying ledge. Besides insignificant small fry, he was rewarded with one pearl, of pure quality, but little larger than a pea. This gave a temporary fillip to his enthusiasm, and he placed it, with loving care, among the baroques and seeds in a wallet which he carried.

"I suppose this little fellow ought to go with the two big ones in their hiding place," he said, "but I think I'll keep it in my pocket for luck."

As, however, the weeks slipped past with no further success, Chester became more and more depressed. His case was becoming that of the gambler who has staked all on one throw — and lost. Financial resources were almost at an end. Stores had to be paid for with cold cash. At any time now

a trading steamer might appear, bringing things which were urgently needed. The planter could pay for them with his pearls, but that would be a ruinous way of disposing of them, for no trading skipper would give more than a third of their true value. Keith reckoned that, given a proper market for them he could realize between ten and twelve hundred dollars apiece for the two large pearls, and, say, another hundred and fifty for the balance. South Sea values are not those of the Rue de la Paix, nor Bond Street, and Chester didn't take to the notion of haggling over the side of a schooner with some stony-hearted master mariner, and letting the pearls go for a tithe of their real value. His capital was coming to an end just about eighteen months too soon. Were he able to hang out till his first crops were ready to be shipped that would enable him to turn the corner. As it was disaster was staring him in the face. He became moody and taciturn, eating his meals in silence and spending much of his time alone when ashore, smoking and brooding over his troubles. Joan and Keith tried to rouse him from this slough of despondency but with little effect.

"Shift your ground again, man," Keith urged. "Have a go at the northeast side of the reef for a change. You haven't given that part a trial yet, have you?"

"Not yet," said the planter. "Maybe I will,

though, but it seems to me there's a hoodoo on the thing. Damn it, it's hard luck. Do you know, it looks as though after all, I shall have to — " His voice trailed off, and his eyes wandered away to the south, in the direction of Tamba.

"Have to what?" Keith asked. His interest was genuine, but there was nothing to prevent Chester from acting as he thought fit in his own business affairs. Keith would gladly have gone into minute details with the planter, and talked over every possibility, but Chester was becoming increasingly morose.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging his shoulders and walking away; after which, more than ever, Keith felt that the planter did not wish to discuss his affairs.

A few days after this Joan experienced an unpleasant shock. Her brother had been more grumpy than usual at breakfast, and before he went down to the *Kestrel* he kissed the girl on the forehead and muttered an apology for being such a bear. Then he put off to sea, and Keith went over to the far side of the plantation to consult with Taleile. Joan was busy for a while with household duties, but about an hour afterwards she went out on to the veranda.

The *Kestrel* was nowhere near the reef, but a good six or seven miles from Tao Tao, scudding in the direction of Tamba.

"Chester! Chester!" the girl said aloud in a reproachful voice; and then a look of dull misery crept over her face. The corners of her mouth were drooping and her face was pale when Keith returned to the bungalow, and he read the signs instantly.

"Something has gone wrong," he declared. "What is it?"

For reply Joan pointed out to sea at the ketch, now only a speck in the distance.

Keith frowned.

"Well," he said, glancing from the *Kestrel* to the girl, and back at the *Kestrel*. "Sailed for supplies, hasn't he?"

"I should like to think so, but I doubt it," Joan replied.

"Let's hope so. I suppose he didn't tell you he was off to Tamba?"

Joan shook her head.

"He didn't even hint at it," she declared. "That's what makes me feel so afraid — for his sake. Of course there is the chance that supplies are what he is after. If necessary he need not go to Moniz for them, though so long as Moniz gets his extortionate prices he would trade with anyone. Did he say anything to you about going?"

"Not a word," said Keith. "I suspect he's hard up, and worried like the dickens about his affairs, but I fancied from something he said a few days

ago, that he had a sort of notion of seeing Moniz."

"Why didn't you tell me?" the girl asked.

"Well, it was only a surmise. I put two and two together and concluded that was what he was hankering for, but I thought perhaps the mood would pass off."

Chester Trent did not return to Tao Tao that night, and both his sister and Keith felt restless in his absence. The very fact that he had not spoken of his intention was ominous. Keith paid scant attention to the plantation next day, but remained about the bungalow with the girl, whose uneasiness increased hourly. Personally he was not greatly concerned with Keith's absence, although he was heartily sorry that the youngster was making an idiot of himself again. It was because of the girl that he looked out over the sea to the south so often and occasionally muttered under his breath things which were far from complimentary to Chester Trent.

"This won't do," he declared to the girl as evening approached. "I'm going to get a crew together and row over to Tamba in the whale-boat."

"If you go I go too," the girl said resolutely.

"No," replied the man with an assumption of authority. "It's no trip for a girl in an open boat, and Heaven only knows what sort of trouble we may have there. I shan't come back without him, and there may be some delay."

The girl was very quiet, but her square little chin showed no sign of submissiveness.

"I mean just what I say, Mr. Keith. If you go in the whale-boat I go too. There is going to be no argument about that."

"You know how suddenly heavy weather comes up in these waters," the man protested. "It is full forty miles there and back. I shouldn't like to have it on my conscience that I had drowned you."

"You wouldn't, because if I were drowned you would be too," the girl replied, sticking unflinchingly to her guns. "And if you were drowned I — I'd rather —" She broke off, confusedly.

"Rather what?" he asked with a searching glance at her, and yet feeling a brute.

"Suppose Chester never comes back and you're drowned," she replied, parring, "what sort of a time do you suppose I am going to have by myself on Tao Tao? But that isn't the point. Please understand if you go to Tamba I refuse to be left behind."

The man shrugged his shoulders. As a matter of fact he intensely disliked the idea of going away and leaving her alone, but of two evils he had chosen what he considered to be the lesser.

"Very well," he said, resigned. "We will wait till to-morrow in that case, and see what happens in the meanwhile."

Toward noon on the following day, as there was no sign of the *Kestrel*, Keith took eight oarsmen and put off in the whale-boat. He cast an anxious glance at the sky as they started. A few wisps of fleecy cloud were passing overhead, indicating that there was a good deal of wind above, but the sailor decided they would be safe for a few hours at any rate. They were cutting along, about a dozen miles from Tao Tao, however, when a squall struck the little craft, followed almost immediately by another. They were fierce gusts which made rowing and steering increasingly difficult.

Keith altered his course a few points to allow for drifting.

"I'm afraid it's going to blow hard," he said. "It may pass off in a while, but the best thing we can do now, anyway, is to keep on for Tamba."

Joan nodded, but sat silently in the stern. She knew enough of the mad antics of South Pacific weather to anticipate anything, and did not need to be told there was probably a wetting in store for them before they reached shelter. She placed reliance, however, on Keith's judgment and seamanship.

The next quarter of an hour brought a disagreeable change for the worse. A succession of violent squalls quickly raised a nasty chop on the sea. Again he had to alter the course to make more allowance for the wind. A hissing wave seethed

against the quarter, slewed the stern round, and cascaded over the gunwale, drenching Joan and her companion at the same time. They were still miles from the island, and though the blacks were straining at their oars they were not making enough progress in the right direction to satisfy Keith.

"You bale out with that can, Joan," he said, unconsciously addressing the girl by her Christian name. Two or three inches of water were running about in the bottom of the boat, and while Keith gave all his attention to the tiller the girl baled as fast as she could, but another hissing comber slapped the side angrily and poured in over the gunwale.

The water was almost flush with the seats. In that instant of peril the eyes of the girl and the man sought each other. Even a small wave toppling over the side then would have sealed their fate.

Keith threw all his weight against the tiller, and slowly brought the water-logged craft round into the wind. Stopping rowing, the blacks began to bale for their lives, using their hands as scoops; and after a few minutes of suspense the little craft rode more lightly again.

"Washee, washee," Keith ordered at last, and the black crew bent to their work with a will once more. Now, however, they were no longer making for Tamba but were just able to hold their own against the strength of the gale. With her bows turned

toward the seas, the boat shipped little water. Keith's thoughts were concerned chiefly with the problem of whether the strength of the crew or the gale would first give out. In another couple of hours as the blacks' muscles grew weary, the boat would begin to be carried remorselessly away from Tamba and Tao Tao.

The wind lashed the water savagely, sometimes cutting thin slices clean off the surface and hurling them hundreds of feet.

In an hour the blacks had lost ground to the extent of about a mile. The strain was beginning to tell on them. Keith feared to urge them on too much lest they should use up all their strength and become virtually useless.

Another hour, and Tamba was further away than ever. Keith put his hand on Joan's shoulder.

"Don't be scared, Joan," he said reassuringly. "The niggers aren't beaten yet, and maybe we'll be having supper in a while on board the *Kestrel*."

Joan smiled faintly. Though she had not lost courage there seemed to her little immediate prospect of any such thing happening.

"Shall we make it?" she asked calmly.

Keith wanted to lie to her — wanted to lie more than anything in the world except get the boat under shelter. Her brown eyes were looking up into his trustfully.

"It — it doesn't look much like it for the mo-

ment," he said. "There's no danger of our being swamped, though — yet."

"Thank you," Joan answered simply; and she relapsed into silence.

Keith's attention was fully taken up with the task of keeping the craft head on to the seas. Now he only obtained occasional glimpses of the island of Tamba. The blacks were almost rowed out.

"I'm sorry," Keith said at length, "but we're dropping further to the east. Niggers are poor creatures to depend on when it comes to physical strength. We'd have been ashore by now if these fellows had been white. If we keep afloat and this goes on all night we shall be in a bad fix. You see, there's no compass aboard, and the Pacific is a pretty big place."

"Then you don't think there is any hope for us?" the girl asked, with a look of deep concern.

"I won't say that till she sinks," replied the man from the *Four Winds*, grimly.

Suddenly the violent wind eased up. For two full minutes there was a dead calm, and then a gust of wind blew from the other direction.

Keith's heart gave a leap; as yet he dared not think of it as anything but a playful prank of the gale. But now there came a steady pressure directly from the east.

"Washee, washee!" the man cried exultantly. "Pull, you lazy black scum! Put some beef into

it, or I'll knock you into the middle of the star-board watch. Miss Trent, this crazy wind has shifted right round. How long it'll stop there the angel Gabriel may know, but I don't. If it doesn't jump round again we ought to bump up against the side of the *Kestrel* within an hour."

CHAPTER XIV

CHESTER PAYS A VISIT

WHEN Chester Trent set sail from Tao Tao in his ketch he was in a bitter frame of mind. He was young enough to have been animated in his business ventures by the blind optimism of youth, but yet too old or not blessed with enough patience to rise like a cork before every succeeding wave of adversity. He had thrown himself heart and soul into his pearling venture, and had probably kept his shoulder to that particular wheel, partly owing to Keith's encouragement, much longer than many people would have done. And for that very reason his disappointment, now that he realized his fond ambition had come crashing to the ground, hurt all the more. It had appeared so easy, so fascinating. The two pearls he first found were worth pretty nearly as much as thousands of young professional men were satisfied to earn in a whole year. It had seemed only common sense, logical, obvious, that where two such pearls were found there must be plenty more. He would never have been satisfied had he omitted the search, for nothing but the stark disappointment of failure would

have convinced him of its futility. Unfortunately the crash involved the plantation as well as the pearls. Up to a point he had thought, at any rate, to keep the plantation going. Then, gradually, had come the time when he looked to the pearling to save the plantation. Now he had to go a-begging for someone to provide funds so that the work on Tao Tao could be carried on until the place began to pay dividends. And Chester Trent was sufficiently versed in the ways of the world to know on what sort of terms that would be done.

There was a planter on Tamba named Svenk, a Swede, whom Chester had met two or three times, a hard-working, long-headed fellow, "canny" like most of his countrymen, but good-natured. He had his wife and three children living with him on the plantation, which was a thriving concern. Svenk had sound business judgment, and Chester knew that if the Swede would run over to Tao Tao with him in the *Kestrel* he would see that the possibilities there were sufficient to justify him in financing the venture until the corner was turned.

Svenk listened to the Englishman attentively, then shook his head.

"One year ago, maybe, I'd have been glad to go in with you," he said. "But not now. Sorry, Mr. Trent. It is fifteen years since I first came into the South Seas after a fortune, and now I go back. I have sold out, sir, and if anyone says copra to

me there'll be trouble, yes. And, man, let me tell you, it's mighty hard to persuade people living in civilized parts to buy a place here, where they can't see it without making a trip half way round the world."

This was a blow Chester had not anticipated.

"But, Mr. Svenk," he said, "you wouldn't have to stop out here if you become a sleeping partner with me. I should have thought it was a chance to be leaped at by anyone who knew anything about plantations. You've only to run your eye over the place to see what it is going to be worth in another year or so."

Again the Swede shook his head. He sympathized with the planter, but his plans were made.

"A lot of things can happen in that time, and I have good use for my money meanwhile. I knew a man once who had an island away over there," he said, pointing vaguely to the east. "It was too wonderful, yes. He stay there eight or nine years, and things grew so they made him laugh. He was a lucky man, sir. There was a hill in the middle of his island. One day, pouf! The bottom of the sea dropped out, and no more was there any island, except the top of the hill. But he was a lucky man. That day he had gone off in his schooner to fetch supplies. He didn't see his island go, but he lived to see that it had gone. No, Mr. Trent, I am sorry.

Things are too uncertain in the South Seas when you aren't here to keep an eye on them."

"Do you think that if I went, say, to Sydney, I might find someone who would help me out? Maybe a syndicate —"

The Swede shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"You might try it, yes," he said. "But men have sold plantations to Sydney people before, and they have been bitten."

More depressed than ever, Chester returned to the *Kestrel*, and spent the night on board. Next morning he weighed anchor, and dropped down the coast to where Moniz had his headquarters. He moored the ketch in a little bay, which formed a harbour, and was rowed ashore.

When Chester arrived Moniz was sprawling in a deck chair on the veranda of his bungalow, smoking one of his eternal cigarettes. He had seen the *Kestrel* the moment it came round the point, and a puzzled expression had swept over his swarthy face at sight of her. The first impulse of the Portuguese had been to walk down to the beach, to meet his visitor, but on second thought he remained where he was. As Chester crossed the compound he rose with simulated surprise.

"Hello," said the Englishman, endeavouring to hide the extreme dislike with which he tackled his task.

"Good day, Mr. Trent," said Moniz, motioning the other to a vacant chair. His cunning brain was already seeking to ferret out the reason of Chester's call; in his manner there was not the faintest suggestion that such a thing as grim hostilities had ever existed. "It is like old times to have you here again."

"Umph!" Chester exclaimed, sinking into the chair. He was no diplomat. Like most members of his race, he would have preferred to come out bluntly with his proposal, and get the matter over. But he knew Moniz too well to do that. It was a delicate situation, because when he did lay his cards on the table he must, willy nilly, accept the best terms that the grasping Portuguese chose to give. Therefore he must flutter, moth-like, round the flame for a while, flirting with the subject, or even giving the impression, if possible, that there was no subject to come under discussion at all, though both men knew come it must.

Moniz clapped his hands, and a house boy appeared as if by magic. A few moments later the man brought out a tray, on which were a couple of tumblers, water, and a bottle. Nobody knew better than the trader the infinite wisdom of oiling the conversational wheels at the right moment.

"It's the best brand there is — straight from Scotland," he said, pushing the tray toward his guest.

"No," Chester frowned. "I've cut all that stuff out."

"Nonsense," said Moniz. "Good whisky like this never hurt anyone. Just two fingers, eh?" he added persuasively.

After all, the planter did not wish to seem discourteous, so he nodded. Apparently Moniz's idea of "two fingers" was half a tumbler. Chester sipped the drink, smoked, and chatted casually for a while. The Portuguese continued to study his face covertly, but, drawing blank, replenished the whisky in the Englishman's glass. For an hour or more they beat about the bush, neither making so much as a tentative feint.

"I wish you'd come over to see me oftener, Mr. Trent," the Portuguese said at last. "It is lonely enough here, with so few neighbors, all miles apart. There is too little sociability on Tamba for my liking. The planters here — ah! they make me tired. Once in a month, perhaps, some of them come, but they come only for the stores I sell. There is Svenk. He thinks of nothing now but the day when he will sail away and leave the South Seas altogether. It is his wife who dangles Sweden always before his eyes. Women and business, Mr. Trent, they do not mix. Then there is Diaz. He is making money, yes. But what for? He never spends any of it, and he might just as well be buried for all the good it does him. He's burnt out with

fever now, and by the time he decides to live a man's life he won't be able to take anything but quinine. Now, Angell was different. You never met him, did you? God knows what part of the world he came from, because he never spoke of it. He was a *pandigo* — what you call devil-may-care. Angell enjoyed life — while he lasted. A man must eat if he will drink, though, in a climate like this. I warned him often enough before he died, but he only laughed. There was a woman somewhere or other mixed up with him, too. Just at the finish he wanted me to send her a message, but I couldn't make out what he was saying, though I pretended to write it down to make it easier for him."

"Then she never got the message?" Chester put in. Moniz shrugged his shoulders as he rolled another cigarette.

"Women generally have short memories, which is sometimes a blessing," he replied indifferently. "Mr. Trent," he went on, blowing a cloud of smoke, "I do not speak idly when I say I wish you and I could — ah — understand one another better again."

Chester drummed the ends of his long fingers on the edge of his chair and then sipped from the tumbler with deliberation.

"Indeed!" he said, unconsciously bestowing on the other a cold stare. To have a man make such

profession of friendship after events of the last few months was a little too much for him to swallow whole even in such an isolated spot as Tamba. Perhaps Moniz realized this, but if so he gave no sign of it, nor was he visibly abashed by Chester's lack of enthusiasm.

"Yes," the trader went on. "Two heads are nearly always better than one, even in the South Seas. And there are some big chances to make money at times. *Caramba!* It was a pity Angell would not eat, for we had some schemes on foot that ought to have made us rich."

Chester elevated his eyebrows, in polite interest.

"He and I could have worked together well," Moniz went on reflectively.

There was a brief pause.

"I shouldn't have thought there were many opportunities here, outside planting and —" he was going to add pearling, but he felt that delicacy forbade — "and trading."

Moniz closed one eye.

"I'm an old stager in the Sulu Sea, and when you've been here as long as I have you'll know that it's quite a game," he said mysteriously. "But one man isn't much good by himself. Now, you and I —"

The trader again closed one eye, and Chester, who felt this was an auspicious moment for thawing, smiled vaguely. The potent spirit — which

had never been anywhere near Scotland but had been specially manufactured in Queensland for "the islands" where men cannot afford to be too discriminating — was beginning to work. The edge was taken off his judgment. He still knew Moniz to be an unscrupulous scoundrel, but if Moniz really was able to make money with his schemes, and if he wanted a partner to replace the man who had drunk himself to death, perhaps this was a golden opportunity.

"You're a sly old dog," he said, with a laugh. "How many more years are you going to sit here like a spider in the middle of its net, raking in the shekels?"

"A good many, I hope, Mr. Trent," the Portuguese responded affably, noting with satisfaction that the process of thawing the ice was well under way. "And it's your own fault if we don't put our heads together and do well."

"I'm game," said Chester. "We did have a talk some time ago, you remember, about a partnership in Tao Tao."

For an instant a look of triumph flashed in the eyes of the Portuguese. This, then, was the elaborately concealed object of the Englishman's visit!

"I remember we spoke of it," Moniz replied, without undue enthusiasm. "What sort of shape is the plantation in these days?"

"Fair," Chester replied. Whatever his faults were, he had no stomach for lying. "But I've no doubt the place will be all right eventually. The only thing that troubles me is whether I'll be able to hang out till the dividends begin."

He paused, but Moniz did not speak. This was food for thought for the Portuguese. To begin with, he had never suspected Chester Trent was short of money, and to go on with here was an answer to a question that had often bothered him. There would have been no difficulty about finances if Trent had found pearls in any quantity. Possibly, thought Moniz, his own somewhat exciting but entirely unprofitable experiments off the reef had been unprofitable because there were no pearls there to be found. In that case the interest Moniz would have in the whole affair would drop down to zero.

"A lot of work has been put in there, you know," said Chester.

"You put in a lot of work off the reef without much better results," observed Moniz.

"You mean pearling," Chester said, screwing up his eyebrows.

"Yes. You fooled me over that."

"Fooled you?"

"In a way — yes. Don't you remember when I was over on Tao Tao some time ago you gave

me the impression there were plenty of pearls to be picked up? I believed it." He was still fishing for facts.

"I believed it myself," said Chester. "And moreover I had every reason to."

"But you have changed your mind now, eh?"

Discretion was not Chester's strong suit at that moment. The temptation to indulge in a little apparently harmless bragging was too strong for him.

"I haven't made a fortune at it, but I've found pearls," he replied.

"How many?" asked Moniz quickly. As a matter of fact nothing whatever in connection with the proposal, except pearls, did interest Moniz, but he was too discreet to say so.

Chester took from his pocket a wallet, the contents of which he displayed on a handkerchief.

"Is that all?" said Moniz, visibly disappointed.

"It's all I carry about with me," Chester replied. "There are also two big ones, but I keep them — I keep them where they're safe."

The Portuguese nodded.

"Well," said the planter. "What do you say about a partnership?"

Moniz's enthusiasm was not so apparent now the question of bargaining approached, especially as he saw he could arrange things pretty much as he chose.

"Have another drink," he said. Chester, feeling infinitely relieved by the progress of events,

accepted the invitation willingly. Business was temporarily side-tracked. A little later Moniz endeavoured to revive it, but the planter's balance was too much disturbed by that time, and when he returned to spend the night on the *Kestrel* Chester Trent was glad that nobody had accompanied him to Tamba except the Kanakas.

CHAPTER XV

MONIZ SINGS

CHESTER awoke next morning with a bad headache, an intense thirst, and a full realization of the fact that he had made a fool of himself. He went ashore, in none too sweet a temper, to settle the terms of partnership with Moniz, who artfully suggested that they should crack a bottle together in celebration of the event. On one pretext and another the Portuguese postponed the discussion of business until he judged Chester's mood was softened, and then, producing pen and paper, began to draw up an agreement.

"I'll provide you with stores," he said, biting the end of the pen. "That'll be my share; and stores cost a pile of money, let me tell you. But the plantation is a bad speculation. I may lose all my money, so I shall want half of the crops."

Chester Trent rose unsteadily, his face suddenly drawn and haggard.

"I'll give you a third — not more. That is fair," he said.

"I've told you my terms," declared the Portuguese with a steely glitter in his eyes.

"I'm damned if I agree to them."

"Very well, but it's a pity we've wasted so much time," Moniz observed, pushing aside the paper, but convinced that he could arrange matters his own way all in good time.

They had arrived at a deadlock. There were long arguments, not devoid of heat. It was evening before Chester, seeing no way out of the difficulty, agreed to what the Portuguese had suggested.

"You — you're a hard brute, Moniz," he said in a thick voice. "You're sure there isn't anything else I can throw in to make weight!"

"I'm not hard, Mr. Trent," Moniz replied blandly. "It is only business. Come on, sign the thing."

Chester took the pen into his hand and glanced at the writing which danced under his eyes and looked blurred. Then he cocked his head on one side, listening to someone approaching the bungalow.

"Hello, Trent!" a voice called.

Chester scowled. It did not occur to him to wonder, for the moment, how Keith happened to be on Tamba. Several things seemed to be very confused just then.

"Hello!" he answered, as the man from the *Four Winds* appeared round a bend in the path leading to the bungalow. Trent and Moniz were on the veranda, clearly visible in the light of a

lamp which swung from the porch roof. Keith strode forward quickly; a glance at his friend was enough.

"Thought you must be lost, so I came to look for you," Keith said.

"Get that paper signed," Moniz urged in a low voice, which, however, reached Keith's ears.

Keith shot a glance from one to the other. It was evident that he had turned up at an opportune moment. Chester dipped the pen in the ink again.

"I — I'd go easy on signing anything, just now," Keith declared pointedly.

"What d'you mean?" Chester asked in querulous tones.

"I mean I should wait till I was sober," Keith said.

"*Que diabo!* You mind your own business," Moniz commanded, turning to the American with a snarl.

"That settles it," snapped Keith, reaching forward and taking possession of the agreement. "Sorry to butt in, Trent, but if this man is so keen on getting your signature you must be getting a crooked deal. Anyhow, it'll keep till to-morrow."

Moniz measured Keith with his eyes, his muscles tense. Nothing would have pleased him better than to throw Keith down the steps into the compound. Suddenly, casting discretion to the winds, he leaped forward, with hands outstretched, to grip the sailor

round the throat. Keith anticipated the move by a second, and Moniz, boiling with rage, found himself staring into the barrel of a revolver.

"Keep your dirty paws off," Keith ordered sternly, "and if you attempt to pull a gun out I'll bore a hole in you."

"Don't be a silly ass," Chester said. "Give me that paper back. Hang it all, this is a private matter of business between Moniz and me."

"Well, I'm not reading the thing," Keith replied, thrusting the paper into his pocket. "You can sign it just as well on Tao Tao when you've got a clear head. If it's all right to-morrow will do as well as to-day. Come on down to the ketch. Let's get out of this."

Chester looked up at the big sailor defiantly, and then he wavered. It was a brief war of will power.

"Your sister is here, on the *Kestrel*. She wants to see you. Come on, there's a good chap," Keith went on, taking the other's arm pleasantly.

"'Scuse this interruption," Chester said, with an odd grimace at Moniz. "It's all right, old top. I'll come back and fix this thing up. Keith, I regard this as an unwanted — unwanted — unwarrantable liberty."

"So do I. But I stand pat," Keith replied, pulling gently at the other's arm, and still keeping his revolver in evidence.

Chester rose, swayed a little, and allowed himself to be led toward the steps.

"Distinctly unwan — unwarran'ble liberty," he repeated slowly and with exaggerated dignity.

"Can't help that," replied Keith, as they passed down the steps.

Moniz stood with a dark frown on his forehead as he watched the pair disappear in the semi-darkness. His hands were clenched. His lower lip protruded.

"All right, you American pig!" he muttered, lapsing into his native tongue. "That's another one I owe you. One day soon we shall have a reckoning!"

Which, though Moniz was not sure about it, happened to be strangely prophetic.

The gale, which Keith and his crew of blacks had fought in the whale-boat, had subsided, leaving a heavy ground swell in its wake. There was still a fresh breeze, and the *Kestrel* ran north to Tao Tao, with the empty whale-boat trailing astern. Chester was in a surly mood, and did not utter a word during the twenty-mile run. Keith, none too sure of his friend's ability to make the *Kestrel's* usual moorings, kept a close watch, but the god who looks after drunken men and babies helped the planter out.

Next morning Chester appeared at breakfast looking somewhat sheepish, having none too lively

a recollection of recent events. His sister greeted him a little coldly.

"Go on, say it, Joan!" he said. "I'm ten different kinds of an ass — I'm everything you could call me, and worse. The funny part of it is I haven't the faintest idea how it all happened. You probably think I went off for a jamboree. As a matter of fact, although that's what it seems to have developed into, I started out with perfectly virtuous intentions. Honestly, I don't know how I came to make an idiot of myself."

"It wasn't you, altogether," said Keith. "It was his liquor. That sort of stuff is called 'coffin polish' in the trade. It's more dangerous than nitroglycerine."

"Evidently, because I didn't take much of it — as far as I remember. But, Keith, I've a distinct recollection of Moniz drawing up an agreement, and we were having an argument about it when you butted in. I've been racking my brains ever since I awoke to recall whether I signed the thing or not."

"Do you remember what was in the agreement?" Keith asked.

"Perfectly. That shark was to keep us in grub and other stores until the crops begin. Then he was to go halves."

"Did you read it through?"

"Why no, maybe I didn't. Why?"

"You might as well do so now. Here it is. I haven't looked at it, as I wasn't invited to, but I shouldn't wonder if there's a joker."

Chester took the crumpled sheet, and ran through what Moniz had written.

"You're right — there was a joker," he said. "The only thing he was to share was the crops. See, here, after the word 'plantation,' he has added: . . . and a half interest in all shell banks off the island, and in such pearls as may already have been found there."

"Then," Chester added, glancing at Keith, "you must have taken this agreement away before I signed it."

"That's the idea," Keith agreed. "It sort of occurred to me you'd probably take a different view this morning."

"Damme, Keith, you're a white man," Chester said. "I might have agreed to Moniz having half of the pearls we haven't found, but hang me if I'd let him share those we have *cached*. I'm convinced now that the game is no good, and that's why I shouldn't have had any objection to his including the right to pearl fishing, if he'd done it in a straightforward manner, but he tried another dirty trick on me, and that settles his hash once and for all. God knows what we're going to do, though. We can hang on for another month or two and something may turn up. It's only about five or six

hundred miles to Manila. I might go there and make some sort of a dicker — ”

“Don’t be impatient,” Keith urged. “We may think of two or three different ways out of the difficulty if we take time. And anything is better than handing over the lion’s share to that black-guard on Tamba.”

Two days passed, and whatever Moniz anticipated, he was merely left to chew the cud of reflection. The shells on the drying ledge were all cleared up, and then Chester, more as a matter of routine than anything else, went off in the ketch to take up shell, on Keith’s suggestion, from the northeast side of the reef. It was palpable, when he returned that evening, that his mind was no longer centred on pearling. He was worried. He had spent the entire day, while the divers were at work, trying to disentangle the knot into which he had tied his affairs.

To do him justice, it was on his sister’s account that he cared most. A man, he reflected, can always muddle along somehow, even if he does find himself stranded. But half the capital sunk in the plantation had been Joan’s. She had unquestioningly taken his advice and permitted the investment, placing complete faith in his judgment. And Chester was bitterly conscious of the fact that things might now have been different. In his mortification he apportioned more than a just share of the

blame on to his own shoulders. As a matter of fact, he had chosen the site of the plantation with all the care and skill that was possible, and only inexperience had led him to take the plunge on Tao Tao. And, at any rate, during the first years of their residence on the island, he had done everything humanly possible to make a success of it. It was only when the deadly monotony of island life started to eat into his heart and the corrupting influence of Moniz began to work, that he had played the fool. Just now, however, especially after his recent break on Tamba, he had little self-forgiveness; and it was with a weary brain that he retired to his room. The others were soon asleep. Chester read for a while, and then blew out the light. Soon he was asleep too, but he dreamed uneasy dreams.

Outside, dark, low-lying clouds scudded across a newly born moon. The dome of night was as black as an Egyptian tomb save when a cloud bank opened timidly and admitted a fleeting glimpse of the thin crescent in the heavens. Over all the hot breath of the South Pacific, ozone laden, came to purge its island children of fever. Souging softly through the palms, it kissed Tao Tao as a mother kisses a sleeping babe, and passed on, coming out of the great nowhere and going into the beyond. But for the rustling of the great leaves there was still-

ness everywhere. Tao Tao was wrapped in the deep slumber of equatorial night.

Midnight had passed when a black form emerged stealthily from one of the huts where the labourers had their quarters. Like a cat he had stepped over the sprawling figures on the floor, seeing more with his one beady eye than any white man could with two in such inky blackness. He paused for a moment at the entrance, to be sure his movement had not been observed, and then he slipped, as a shadow among shadows, along the pathway between the palms, heading northward. He travelled at a jog trot, covering the ground rapidly, savage instinct leading him when the fitful moon was obscured. At length, after passing over the rough land bordering the island at its northern extremity, he emerged on the shore, and strained his eyes out seaward.

For an hour he remained motionless, expectant. Then he caught sight of a faint light in the distance and grunted with satisfaction. Another half hour passed, the light drawing nearer steadily. It was now not more than about half a mile away. While he watched, the light was extinguished, and then flashed three times.

Isa produced a box of matches from the folds of his loin cloth and, with deliberateness which showed that he was no stranger to this odd proceeding, he took out several matches in a bunch,

ignited them, and held them upside down, to get the maximum blaze out of his miniature torch.

Immediately afterwards there came three more flashes of the light out at sea, and Isa, slipping off his scant clothing, slid like a seal into the water. With the long, powerful overarm stroke at which the islanders are masters, he glided away from Tao Tao, in the direction of the twinkling light. He uttered no sound until he was by the side of the vessel, which was swinging to her anchor, sails flapping lazily in the hot night air.

"Oya!" the black called; and a lantern was held over the side to indicate the position of a rope ladder, up which the swimmer scrambled. Awaiting him was a figure clad in pajamas, a figure whose face showed white in the light of the lantern. Between the man's lips was one of his eternal cigarettes.

"What you tell me?" Moniz asked.

"No tell any different," replied Isa, with a shrug of his gleaming shoulders. "Big Marster Trent um go pearl fishing alle same. Isa want um gin."

It was part of the bargain. Even a South Sea islander objects to taking a chance among the sharks at night, but gin will buy his very soul, if he happens to have such a commodity, as well as his body. Half a tumbler of the raw spirit was fetched, and the black put it down in one fiery draught.

"You want three four bottles gin, eh?" Moniz asked him. "Plenty gin all at one time, eh?"

Such a suggestion conveyed to Isa the nearest thing he knew to perfect bliss, and he grunted acquiescence.

"Not yet," said Moniz with a grim laugh. "Wait, you black scum. Listen. You tell me plenty damn lie. You say Marster Trent he got heap big lot of pearls."

"He no damn lie," replied Isa, with a figurative eye on illimitable supplies of gin, and prepared to match cunning with cunning. As a matter of fact, he did not know the extent of Chester Trent's total haul, for the planter had been careful not to let any of the blacks watch his operations near the drying ledge. That that was where he washed the oysters for pearls, of course, every man on Tao Tao knew. But as big Marster Trent said nothing whatever about his success or failure, they could only guess what he found. And Isa guessed that the planter must have a pretty considerable collection of pearls stored away by now. Anyway, he was perfectly prepared to declare this as a fact if by so doing he came within measurable distance of much gin.

"Big Marster Trent he say he only find two plenty big pearl," said Moniz, watching the face of the other closely in the rays of the lantern.

"Big Marster Trent he tell damn lie," Isa declared firmly.

The eyes of the Portuguese glittered. He was more than half inclined to believe the diver, though with him the wish was father to the thought. At this nocturnal rendezvous on the night when the last moon was new, Isa had spoken of many pearls that Chester Trent was finding; and he swore he had actually seen them, anticipating that would earn him an extra glass of toddy, which it did.

"You fetch me um pearls and I give you three four plenty bottles," Moniz said, extending all his fingers to indicate the extent of his generosity. "What name, eh?"

"Me bring um pearls one night," the black agreed, after a moment's reflection, meaning one night hence, or in other words, at that hour on the morrow. "Me want um knife — plenty too much big knife," he added with cold-blooded forethought.

A sinister expression swept over the trader's face. He went below and returned a few moments later with a murderous looking weapon, which he handed to the diver.

"You kill, eh?" Moniz asked, unmoved.

Isa grunted.

"Don't forget Marster Keith," the trader said with sudden fury. "He kill you if you no kill him."

Isa made a curious grimace, twisting his ugly face up at one side, and passed the sharp blade in front of his own throat to illustrate his intentions.

Then he gripped the knife in his teeth and dropped back into the water. For a moment or two Moniz heard the swish of the black's arm as he propelled his body forward in the darkness. Then there was silence. Moniz bared his teeth in a grin, as one who is well satisfied with what he has done.

"Anchor up. Jump, you lazy devils," he cried; and all the way across to Tamba he hummed a tune, the words of which, in Portuguese, referred in laudatory terms to wine, women and song. Moniz was really happy.

CHAPTER XVI

A THRUST IN THE DARK

IT was the darkest hour of the night, preceding dawn. Tao Tao remained wrapped in slumber. The hot breath of the Pacific still souged amid the palm tree leaves and set them a-rustling.

Keith stirred uneasily in his sleep. Perhaps some prescience of danger was calling him back to consciousness. Certainly there had been no sound in the bungalow louder than one slight creak, as though something had blundered against a chair. For the space of thirty seconds he breathed deeply and regularly again; and then he awoke with a start, lay still, and strained his ears. When wakefulness comes to a sailor in such a manner there is generally a reason. It may be that the wind has shifted a point or two, giving the vessel a slightly different motion. Or it may be that inexplicable sense, rarely given to the landsman, which makes him feel the imminence of danger when there is no apparent sign of it.

The soft wind was making a leaf outside tap-tap against the thin woodwork like the beating of a great moth's wings. Keith remembered he had heard it before, and, closing his eyes, decided to

snap off part of the vine next morning, so that it would not disturb him again at such an ungodly hour. It must have been that tapping which awoke him, and yet, though he closed his eyes, he was just as wide awake. Odd! Surely he wasn't cultivating nerves!

A creak in a floor board. It was within a few feet of his bedside. With one swift movement he grasped the cover, throwing it aside, and raised his head from the pillow. Death, swift and sure, would have followed had he been a fraction of a second later in rising, for a keen-bladed knife, impelled by an arm with the strength of steel, was thrust downward at the spot where his breast had been. The hand round the haft grazed down the spine of the man from the *Four Winds*.

Like a shot from a pistol, Keith leaped out of bed, with a vivid memory of what had happened the last time a murderous attack had been made on him in the same room. In three strides he was at the window, to cut off his assailant's escape; and with a roar that might have been heard a mile away, he was bellowing for Chester Trent. He always kept a loaded revolver under his pillow, but in his haste he had forgotten it. He could not see a thing, and any moment he expected to feel the thrust of steel into his flesh, but he was risking that. Whatever happened, the black was not going to escape the same way this time.

There was a thump on the floor in the adjoining room as Chester jumped right out of bed.

"Yes — yes — hello!" he called through the partition, dazed for a moment.

"Listen to me," Keith replied. "First strike a light. Then get your gun. There's some one in here. Hurry!"

In less than half a minute Chester emerged from his room with a candle, and as he did so Keith swore, for he saw his own bedroom door was open. He was alone. The black had entered the bungalow by a window in the living-room, and bolted out the same way.

Joan was up now, with a kimono thrown round her shoulders, and as she came from her door Keith noticed that she had her own formidable revolver for emergencies.

"What is it?" she asked tremulously.

"My God!" Chester exclaimed, glancing round the living-room.

The place had been ransacked. Every drawer was open, their contents spread on the floor. And yet, so far as they could see at a glance, the object of the intruder had not been the theft of stores or other things which one would naturally expect natives to take. It looked more as though a systematic search had been made for some definite object.



"The pearls!" cried Joan. "That's what they were after."

Keith had dived back into his room for his gun, and to slip on a pair of shoes. Chester ran to the place where he had hidden the two large pearls, but they were undisturbed.

"Quick," Keith cried, reappearing. "You come too, Miss Trent. It isn't safe for you to be left here alone."

"What're you going to do, man?" asked Chester, still slightly bewildered by the suddenness of events, as he found himself taken by the arm and urged toward the door.

"The shed! For the love of Mike, hurry! There must be a nigger missing from where they sleep, and when we've found out which one —"

It was not necessary for Keith to explain further. The man who had attempted murder had jumped out of the window that was open. Opposite it, and immediately beyond the compound, was a clump of trees. Unless the culprit had the presence of mind to bolt straight back to the sleeping hut to avoid discovery, he would seek cover among the trees.

Holding a lantern high, and urging Joan to keep near him, Chester followed Keith, who found Taleile standing perplexed, in the doorway of the men's hut.

"What name? What name? What for you shout?" asked the black in alarm.

"Nigger he just come in um hut. What name him, eh?" Keith asked breathlessly.

"No nigger he come in here," Taleile replied confidently. "Me hear one plenty big damn row and come out, allee same stop here."

"Then we've got him," Keith snapped triumphantly, "or at least we can find out who it was. This chap has been here like a sentry ever since I yelled. Here you, Taleile. One nigger maybe two not in hut. What name, eh? Call 'em out."

"Oya, oya," shouted Taleile, putting his head inside the doorway; and out tumbled the black crew, some blinking and rubbing their eyes, others craning their necks in every direction, seeking the cause of this unusual proceeding. Taleile soon had them assembled in a line, and in the light of the lantern he inspected their faces one by one.

"Isa, he no here. Baloo he no here," the "boss boy" declared at last.

Chester meanwhile had been counting the dark figures and he found that only two were missing.

"I half suspected that vicious looking brute Baloo had a hand in it," Keith declared. "Well, Trent, what d'you suggest?"

"Can't do a thing till it's light, Keith. The pair of 'em may be a mile away by now, but I give you my word, there won't be a stroke of work done on this place until we've roped those beggars in. Ta-

leile, you come along, bring Peter Pan and Maromi."

The rest of the hands, greatly puzzled, and chattering like a flock of magpies, went back into their sleeping-house, but the three blacks chosen were stationed outside the house as a sort of bodyguard, lest another attack should be made. The first rays of the sun began to glint through the trees an hour later while Joan and the two men were finishing an early breakfast. Already the black crew had finished their morning meal, and were squatting round their hut, awaiting orders.

"It's ten thousand to one they're hiding in the Wilderness," Chester declared. "so we should be wasting our time looking anywhere else."

The Wilderness, a patch of rough land embracing perhaps a square mile all told, lay to the extreme north-west of Tao Tao. For plantation purposes it was almost useless, so it still remained in its virgin state — wild, covered with coral dust and sand, and overgrown with a mass of brushwood. Here and there were natural clearings where even the pando bushes failed to make a successful struggle for existence, but there were patches of tangled shrub which offered a far better hiding place than the cultivated groves of palms.

"We can drive the whole district," said Keith.

"That's the only way," agreed Chester. "Pity

old Boris isn't here now. He'd have had the time of his life. A nigger hunt would have tickled him to death. Taleile," he went on, going to the veranda, "you go along and tell all them plenty fella what I want, see?"

He explained his programme at length. The blacks were to spread out in a line at that side of the Wilderness, and close in, driving the fugitives to the shore where the island came to a point at its westernmost extremity. They were to arm themselves with sticks, as Isa and Baloo would probably put up a fight when cornered. The culprits were to be taken alive or dead. If they were killed that was their own lookout. But the men who took them were each to receive six sticks of tobacco and six yards of calico.

This news was received by the natives with a buzz of satisfaction. Such a lavish offer of tobacco would, in itself, have stirred all their enthusiasm for the chase, but the calico was an added spur, for calico was scarce on Tao Tao, and the black who will not go through fire and water for a strip of such material has yet to be born.

The whole force trooped to the Wilderness, four men only being left behind to guard the bungalow in case the planter's calculations should prove wrong. Chester and Keith, with Joan, were in the centre of the line, Taleile going some distance to their left, Peter Pan a hundred yards or so to their right. In

this order they advanced half way through the scrub without coming across any sign of their quarry.

"There's only one thing I'm afraid of," said Chester. "They may possibly have swum for it before sun-up."

"Where to?" Keith asked dubiously.

"They could get to the reef, anyway. I'll have 'em, though, even if they swim for it now."

The black line was going forward steadily. It was shorter now, for the island was narrowing.

"Oya!" yelled Peter Pan suddenly, and in a few moments the two white men were at his side. The black pointed to footmarks in the sand leading into a tangled clump of bushes, and then to a twig which had obviously only recently been broken.

The meaning was clear enough. None but the fugitives could have left these indications, for nobody ever went there. Hearing the sound of their pursuers approaching, they had sought shelter in the clump, and there, in all probability they were still hiding.

Keith and Chester held a hasty consultation and decided to swing forward their right and left flank until this particular thicket was surrounded. Five minutes later there was a living ring round the spot, and two or three of the more courageous blacks pushed their way warily into the bushes. Wild cries of exultation rose from the natives — a savage roar calculated to inspire fear in the heart of any

living thing at their mercy. A hunt such as this was just what appealed to them. Against Isa and Baloo they had no personal feeling. What the fugitives had done was of small concern to them. Sufficient that there was an excuse for exciting sport. The affair was becoming a little too brutal for Chester's liking. He had all the Englishman's love of fair play, and this promised to develop into cold-blooded murder. It would have been next to impossible, however, to call off the yelling horde. Suddenly the noise among the men nearest the beach rose to a scream of delight, and Keith, rushing round, revolver in hand, arrived there just in time to prevent the spirit of Isa joining those of his forefathers by a most painful route. The diver, seeing that he was trapped, had attempted to bolt, and had been caught in the human net. Heavy blows fell on every part of his body, and but for nature's provision of a thick skull he would probably have been unconscious before Keith, after discharging his weapon twice into the air, succeeded in driving the horde off. Isa was then taken prisoner, his arms being bound tightly with creeper stems.

A few moments afterwards there were signs of a fierce struggle in the thick of the slump. Peter Pan, creeping cautiously, had run Baloo to earth, and the pair of them were engaged in a battle royal. More excited and out of hand than ever, the assembled blacks surged into the bushes. Keith's attention

was fully occupied at the moment with superintending the pinioning of Isa. Wielding a heavy stick, Baloo was warding off the blows which Peter Pan aimed at him, while another black was crawling toward him in the rear. Chester, struggling through the tangled growth, arrived on the scene, and with his gun pointed ordered all three to throw aside their sticks. Baloo looked round in desperation, but after a moment's hesitation obeyed, seeing that the odds were against him, and, rather than be pierced by a bullet, stood still while he, too, was pinioned. The prisoners were then escorted back to a clearing near the bungalow, where Chester Trent took steps to impress the rest of the crew against similarly lawless outbreaks.

The blacks squatted, native fashion, in a semi-circle, the two culprits being compelled to stand in the centre. Chester then harangued the crowd, telling them just what had happened during the night, and how the rule of the white man exacted penalties for crime of that order. He sentenced each of the prisoners to twenty strokes of the lash and six months' imprisonment without tobacco, together with one year's loss of pay. Also he was careful to make it clear that if any one else were guilty of similar crime the penalty would be even more severe.

Isa and Baloo were then tied to a tree and in the presence of the entire black crew, were flogged by Taleile. The other natives watched this proceeding,

curiously unmoved. It was a display of power that appealed strongly to their cruel natures, lacking a little, perhaps, in piquancy, because it did not involve the cracking of joints, which is an accepted method of punishment by the South Sea islander when he wishes to set a powerful example, but interesting — decidedly interesting.

The triced savages howled with pain, for the thong cut deeply into their black skins, and raised a wale wherever it struck. With extreme distaste, the white men watched the performance to the end, and then saw Isa and Baloo fastened up in the hut that was to act as their prison.

"Beastly business!" said Chester. "I hate this sort of thing, but there are times when it's absolutely necessary."

"You've got to make 'em understand," agreed Keith, "and the thing doesn't penetrate to their brains till you wade right into 'em properly."

"Why, man," said Chester, "you look almost as though it was you who had been flogged. Nothing wrong, is there?"

"A touch of fever, I think," Keith replied wearily. "It's an old friend of mine. Maybe it'll pass off soon. Guess I'll lie down for a spell. You've got some quinine around, I suppose? You might give me fifteen or twenty grains. It's got to be kill or cure with me when it starts."

His face was drawn and pinched, with a hectic

flush on the upper part of the cheek bones. All morning he had felt the symptoms of a bout of malaria. Now his head was aching severely, there seemed to be a distance of about ten feet from his eyes down to the ground, and his legs, which had become heavy as lead, almost refused to do his bidding, while the rest of his body felt as though it were ready to float off airily into space.

Joan viewed this sudden change in Keith with alarm, and insisted on his going to bed instantly. Keith was in no state to resist such peremptory orders.

"You're very good," he said. "I'll be all right in an hour or two."

A stone jar filled with hot water was placed at his feet, and blankets were piled onto him. For hours he lay suffering the torment of the malaria patient, but before the morrow the perspiration came, and he fell into a placid sleep.

Next morning he felt well enough to get up for breakfast, and then he was told that Isa and Baloo had escaped during the night. The hut in which they had been fastened was a strongly built place, from which it had seemed a couple of almost naked men would not be likely to break out. They had, however, either found a weak place in the structure and forced some of the beams apart, or had been helped by someone on the outside.

“They’re still on the island, though, I suppose?” said Keith.

“No, confound ’em,” replied Chester. “That’s the worst of it. They’ve cleared out — swum to the *Kestrel* and rowed off in the ketch’s small boat. God knows where they’ve gone to, but I hope they fall into the hands of some hungry cannibal king —”

“Don’t say such horrible things, Chester. You know you don’t mean it,” Joan protested.

“Well, I’ll cut out the cannibals then,” the planter replied with a laugh, “but boats like that don’t grow on bramble bushes out here, and if ever those two cut-throats fall into my hands again they’ll have occasion to remember it as long as they live —”

A long-drawn-out call from a vessel’s siren interrupted him.

CHAPTER XVII

STOLEN!

ALL three hastened out on to the veranda.
“Hello-o-o!” Chester exclaimed delightedly, looking down into the bay.

“A warship!” cried the girl.

“British gunboat, as I live!” Chester declared.
“See, they’re lowering a boat.”

Keith heard, but he could not see the vessel. He was holding on to the rail of the veranda, while his fever-racked body shook. Everything beyond the compound looked blurred. Ill though he was, a sudden fear gripped him.

“She — she isn’t by any chance an American boat?” he asked.

“She’s as British as I am,” the planter replied; and the man from the *Four Winds* seemed to gather a certain amount of comfort from the assurance. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, and squared his shoulders, as though to throw off the ague by sheer force. He knew that the place where he ought to be was bed, but, trusting that the attack would pass off as quickly as it had come, he joined the others and walked down to the beach.

By the time they reached the shore a gig, driven through the water by naval oarsmen, with precision such as one only associates with navy men, was grounding on the sand, and a dapper lieutenant jumped ashore.

"Well, sir," said Chester, advancing toward him with outstretched hand. "This does my eyes good, but where have you come from?"

"Just prowling about," replied the officer. "We came to see if you could let us fill up our water-tanks, and — and to say how d'you do, of course," he added with a glance at the girl.

"My name's Trent," the planter explained. "This is my sister, and let me introduce my friend, Mr. Keith."

"Glad to meet you all," the lieutenant said. "It's a pleasure to see a white man. We've bumped up against nothing but niggers for the last two months — come all the way from the Solomons, where we'd been sent to teach a lesson to a black gentleman on Marovo. You don't overdo the social side of things out here, I suppose — I mean too many dances and dinner parties and things!"

"We had to make two niggers dance here yesterday, but they didn't particularly enjoy it," Chester replied with a laugh.

"What was the trouble?" asked the officer.

"Nothing much. They tried to kill us all, only luckily they didn't succeed."

"Is there anything we can do?" the lieutenant asked, pointing to the little warship airily. "She's got teeth, and can bite, though you mightn't think so to look at her now. We had to give our black gentleman a pretty severe dose of shrapnel before he came to his senses. They're scared of shrapnel. It makes too much noise for their liking. Two mining prospectors disappeared on Marovo, and the Commissioner got wind that some of the natives were bragging that they'd added a couple of white heads to their collection. The chief swore by the weasand of his favourite wife that he'd seen nothing of the prospectors, till some of his pals gave him away. Then diplomatic relations were kind of severed, and we had to go and pump lead at him just to show that the Big White Chief doesn't permit his subjects to *kai kai* people. We blew the top off two grass huts and killed a pig or so. They tell me some more lunatics are off gold-hunting on Marovo soon, so I expect we'll get instructions before long to go and blow some more roofs off. Seriously, though, can we do anything for you here?"

"Thanks, no," Chester replied. "We gave 'em a good leathering. Since then they've cleared out in a boat."

"Won't you join us at lunch?" Joan asked. "We don't fare very sumptuously on Tao Tao, but if you care to bring a party up to the house we can

at least give you a change from ship's diet. There are plenty of birds on the island."

The lieutenant, who wore his cap at a doggy angle, shaved twice a day even in the Sulu Sea, and considered that femininity was always his strong suit, bowed gracefully and accepted the invitation with alacrity. As a matter of fact he would have counted it a joy to lunch on crackers and cheese, or even go without lunch altogether, so long as he might bask in the presence of such a charming girl for a while. For a moment he was tormented by a terrible temptation — the temptation not to pass the word along to his brother officers. There were half a dozen of them who would almost have given a month's pay for such a chance, especially as the commissariat on H. M. S. *Petrel* was very indifferent after their long cruise. Pork was the only fresh meat they had been able to obtain for months.

Much, however, as the lieutenant would have liked to restrict the luncheon party to four, his conscience was too much for him.

"Birds!" he exclaimed. "It'll sound like a gift from Heaven to some of the fellows on the *Petrel*. We're all slowly starving to death on canned tack."

"We shall be delighted," said Joan. "There is just about enough crockery to go round for half a dozen of you."

"Thank you," said the officer. "If you will be kind enough to tell me where I can have these

casks filled with water I'll get 'em ready and go back to the ship to spread the glad tidings."

Keith had barely spoken. For one thing his head was playing him ridiculous tricks. Occasionally the world spun round dizzily like a tee-to-tum, and when it stopped with a nauseating jerk the figure of the naval officer assumed grotesque proportions. He stretched to an impossible height — a perfectly ludicrous height — and then contracted to a blur, all of which was head. Keith was afraid to trust himself to speech, lest he should make comments on these peculiarities on the part of the lieutenant, because, though his eyes showed him absurd things he still had sufficient common sense left to know that it was a mere delusion, for which he had to thank the malarial germ. Also he was fervently anxious to know whether the lieutenant's visit had a direct bearing on certain incidents which occurred on the tramp steamer *Four Winds*. It became an obsession with him to settle that problem by putting the question direct. And yet that wouldn't do. No, it would be lacking in diplomacy, he reflected. Somehow it would be wrong to raise the point now, after keeping his silence so long. And yet it would be vitally interesting to know. If only the world would stand still for a few minutes he would be able to think sanely.

Then the attack passed away for a while, leaving him childishly weak, for his knees would only just

hold him up. He saw the officer turn to his "blue jackets," and heard him giving orders; and then, regaining a grip on his thoughts, he realized it was a very excellent thing that he had checked the impulse to ask whether the *Petrel* was in search of a man from the *Four Winds*.

Maromi was instructed to rise to the supreme height of his culinary art for the occasion, for this was the first and only luncheon party that had ever been given on Tao Tao, if one excepted the rare occasions when the skipper of some trading schooner, poking her nose among the islands in search of cargo, had come ashore and joined the Trents at their table. Fortunately there were birds aplenty, that had been shot several days before, and under Joan's guidance Maromi had become somewhat of an artist at preparing these delicacies for the table.

Before noon the gig came ashore again, bringing the Commander, the lieutenant, three other officers and a man in mufti, who was introduced as a Mr. Steel.

"He was handed over to us with a broken arm by a trading tramp," the lieutenant explained. "One of the seamen on the tramp had put him into splints as well as he could, and when our doctor took him in hand Steel's temper wasn't a thing to turn loose in polite society. We're carrying him back to civilization out of compassion. His temper's

improving now, but we nearly had to drop him overboard at first."

Steel smiled.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Trent," he explained. "I'd have been dead in a very short while if they hadn't turned up in their two-by-four little box of rattles, because a thing called gangrene had started, and the skipper of the tramp was seriously proposing an operation on me with the butcher's saw as there was nothing else handy. Pills, here, wanted to take all my farewell messages when he first saw it, as he said he wouldn't give a whoop in — I mean a tinker's cuss for my chance. But that was his little joke. He must have his joke. So I fooled him by getting well again, and he can't bring himself to be polite to me now except in moments of forgetfulness."

"Floating about in a tramp steamer off the Solomons is a most unfortunate time to break an arm. How did you happen to be there?" asked Chester, his interest aroused.

"Looking for trouble," said Steel. "I've spent the last six months hunting everywhere from Singapore to Fiji for a good investment in a plantation, but I haven't found one. Either they're rotten, and the owners are almost willing to give 'em away, or they're reasonably good and the owners want ten years' profits, all rolled into one, paid in the purchase price."

"Well, Mr. Steel," said Chester, "Tao Tao is in the market, so you might cast your discriminating eyes over the place before you leave us."

"With pleasure," Steel agreed.

They were all sitting on the veranda, awaiting the call to luncheon. Keith felt as though a fierce fire was burning inside his head. When addressed directly he replied in monosyllables. He could not think rationally for more than a minute at a time. He knew the moment was approaching when he must give up the fight against the fever and get between the sheets, but he had a fixed idea that these light-hearted visitors were carefully concealing the real purpose of their visit. Either it had something to do with the *Four Winds* or else—. He was scowling at the ship's doctor when their eyes met. Pills leaned over toward Keith with an amiable smile.

"You look to me as though a jolly good dose of quinine might do you good," he said. "Haven't you any on the island?"

Keith nodded, which Pills didn't consider discourteous in the circumstances, and the sailor, rising with an effort, went indoors. There was nobody in the living-room. He stood there a few moments, swaying, and striving to keep a rein on his galloping thoughts. His hand went to his forehead, and a queer light came into his eyes.

It was several minutes before he rejoined the

others on the veranda. The ague had passed off then, but his brain was still playing absurd tricks.

After lunch Steel and Chester, who found a good deal to discuss concerning "shop," drifted into an animated conversation on the subject of business prospects in the South Seas, and a bright thought assailed the planter of Tao Tao.

"Ever been interested in pearling?" he asked.

"I have dabbled — once or twice," Steel replied. "A man can't keep out of it for ever in these waters if he has any imagination — and a chance. I did fairly well in the Banda Sea some years ago until my partner died. Black water fever nipped him off. After that I chucked it up, because I didn't know a whole lot about it, and we'd got pretty well all there was in the place where we were working."

Chester blew a wreath of cigar smoke thoughtfully.

"I wish, Mr. Steel, that you were staying longer. I have found pearls right here at Tao Tao."

Steel gave him a glance of interrogation.

"Indeed!" he said, with quickened interest. "Much success?"

"Yes — and no," Chester replied. "You know what it is, Mr. Steel. The things don't jump up and hit you in the eye. You've got to dig for 'em, so to speak. Now, there's a spot not far from the shore of this island which looked to me once as though it were going to produce a fortune. There

are pearls there. Damme, I've found the things. Fetched divers over, and all that sort of thing. I've spent weeks — aye, months, grubbing about there, but somehow I've always just missed it — missed striking big, I mean."

"Perseverance, my boy, perseverance," said Steel. "It all depends, of course, on what luck you've had so far, that is to say, whether you've come across any real winners. If you have there should be more about."

"That's just what aggravates me," Chester declared, taking the wallet from his pocket. "I have come across real winners, but only two of 'em. I have them hidden away, but here are the rest. There's one fair-sized little chap, a number of baroques and the remainder are seeds."

"Enough to make a fellow feel deuced hopeful about it," Steel agreed, examining the contents of the wallet carefully. "Stick to it, and you may win out yet."

Chester puffed away in silence for a few moments.

"I've stuck to it as long as I can," he said at last, dolefully. "To tell you the truth, I'm getting just about to the end of my tether."

"Capital dried up, eh?"

"Why, yes. That's the chief thing, of course. It's enough, anyway. Also it takes a devil of a lot of pluck to go on week after week by yourself,

without enough success to keep your enthusiasm up to the scratch."

"Why," said Steel, stroking his moustache reflectively, "you spoke about a couple of bigger pearls than these, a few minutes ago. Would you—would you care to let me have a squint at them? What I mean is, I'm always open to take a little flutter if there's a chance of it turning out well. I don't know that I'd care to invest anything in the plantation on Tao Tao, because just between you and me there's a mighty lot of work to be done on the place, and though you might make a living here, I really don't think there's a fortune in it, as there is in some places."

"I know it," Chester admitted reluctantly.

"But so far as the pearling is concerned," Steel went on, "I might be induced to stop here for a few months, at any rate, and ascertain what there was to it. I'd want to see the two big pearls first, though. Even if we couldn't arrange a sort of partnership, by the way, I might take them off your hands at a reasonable price. I'm in the South Seas on business, y'know."

Chester rose, with a curious sense of elation. "'Scuse me, I'll be back in half a minute," he said.

"Everything comes to him who waits!" he added to himself, going into his bedroom. "Now who on earth would have imagined an offer like this would drop clean out of the heav —"

He gave a violent start, and stood for a moment rooted to the floor.

The wooden wedge was no longer in the hole in the beam where the pearls had been hidden. Chester took a step forward slowly, as though afraid to look into the cavity, and even as he did so felt sure that it was empty.

“Stolen!” he exclaimed aloud, looking over his shoulder, half expecting to see the thief lurking in the room. “Why — why — the things were there this morning!”

CHAPTER XVIII

DELIRIUM

WITH eyes blazing, he strode toward the veranda, but at sight of the officers he pulled up sharply. If he were not careful he might give the impression that he suspected one of his guests. Keith, who was beginning to collapse under the effects of fever, had been urged by the doctor to take to his bed, and he met Chester at the doorway.

"I say, Keith —" the planter began; but the man from the *Four Winds* passed him with unseeing eyes. He was moving mechanically, knowing nothing but the fact that he must get under the blankets.

Chester caught him by the arm and helped him to undress.

"You'll stop there till I tell you to get up, this time, old man," the planter declared, "or else we shall be having a corpse on our hands."

Keith looked at his host curiously.

"How do you feel now?" Chester asked, when he had covered the sick man up.

"It's a lie!" said Keith in a strange voice.

"Starboard a bit. Why, that must be Sandy Hook light! Didn't know we were so near. Starboard, I said, thick head! One of these days you'll get your block knocked off, like Murdock did. Stone dead he was. I hate killing men, Gibbs. They don't stop dead, damn them. Murdock was an obstinate pig when he was alive, and he's too obstinate to stay in his grave now. Eh? Oh, no. Of course. He was dumped overboard, as you say. Well, why in hell can't he stay there, instead of fooling around on Tao Tao? Think I must have got a touch of fever, Gibbs. Hold her on that course a while. I'm going below for a dose of quinine."

Chester listened, and frowned, perplexed. Then he stole out of the room and fetched the doctor.

"Can't do a thing till the sweat comes," declared Pills. "Keep him well covered up, though, and I expect he'll pull through all right. They generally do."

"Generally, eh? Do you think there's a doubt about it, doctor?"

"Not exactly. He's pretty bad, though. Guess I can persuade the Old Man to keep his hook down here till to-morrow. The ship's in no hurry. Probably your patient will be better by then."

"Joan," said her brother quietly, a few minutes later, "you'd better nurse Keith a while. I'll take it on as soon as these fellows go. He's pretty bad

and — Joan — something else has happened —”

“What is it?” asked the girl, deeply concerned. It was only too clear to her that Chester had received a shock. He spoke in a quick, nervous manner, and in spite of the tan on his face he had paled a little.

“The pearls have vanished. But don’t worry about it just now,” Chester said kindly. “It’s nothing desperate, at any rate.”

“I’m sorry,” the planter went on a moment later, addressing Steel, as he subsided into a chair by the visitor’s side. “I can’t lay my hands on those pearls for the minute.”

“So!” replied Steel thoughtfully. There was a tinge of suspicion in the way he said it, and an indefinable change crept into his manner. It was on the strength of those pearls that were to have been produced, that he had made a tentative offer to enter into a partnership. Chester noticed the effect of his announcement, but he did not blame Steel.

“It’s devilish awkward. Sounds like a variety of the confidence trick, doesn’t it?” he said with a forced laugh, though a frown hung on his forehead.

“Why, no,” replied Steel politely. “It just occurred to me that I’d be willing to make a speculation if you’d got decent samples to show, though, of course, if you haven’t it isn’t — er — it isn’t so attractive, is it?”

"Naturally," agreed Chester. "It's a nuisance, though. I'd rather you didn't say anything about it, but the pearls have been stolen."

Steel flicked the ash from the end of his cigar, but otherwise he did not move for a moment.

"Indeed!" he said at last. "Since when?" He did not wish to appear discourteous to his host, but the story sounded a little fishy.

"Since this morning," Chester declared. "I know you think it queer, and I shouldn't have told you but for our previous conversation. Some of the niggers have got at the things, I expect, though how on earth they knew where to look for them is more than I can understand. I really was awfully glad at the idea of having you join me, but let's forget it," he added, as though determined to dismiss the subject from his mind.

Steel cast a searching glance at the other man. He was puzzled. From the first he had taken a liking to Chester. He was more than half inclined to believe him now, although pearls do not disappear, as a rule, in such places as Tao Tao. In the course of his wanderings through the South Seas he had met some queer customers, ready to play tricks of every imaginable kind. He decided, however, that Chester was no trickster. Steel was sympathetic, yet, in the circumstances, no business deal was possible.

"Look here," he said, "we've got a husky bunch

of fellows ashore, all dying for a bit of excitement. I'm quite sure they'd do anything in their power to help you, and they'd enjoy doing it. Why not let us round up every nigger on the place and — ”

“ No, no, forget it. Thanks all the same. The pearls will be hidden by now. It's just the culminating point. Every single thing that could go wrong has gone wrong lately. There's a regular landslide comes in the affairs of all men sooner or later, Mr. Steel. Mine's under way. I shouldn't be in the least surprised to see the blooming roof fall in now. The only satisfaction I have about it all is that it's due to my own folly to a large extent — the landslide, I mean, not this latest phase of it. I ought to be kicked all the way from here to Hong Kong and then kicked back again. There's that about the atmosphere of the Pacific which demoralizes a fellow unless he's careful. There's an insidious something that comes over you without your knowing it.”

“ True enough,” Steel agreed.

“ True! Don't I know it? I was going hell-for-leather straight to the bow-wows a few months ago, and letting everything slide. God knows things were sliding fast enough on their own account, without me helping. Then this man Keith came here, and after a few days, when he got the hang of things, he read me a sort of curtain lecture — not too much, you know, but just sufficient to show me

that I was ten different kinds of a fool. Pretty decent of him, too, because it wasn't any affair of his, and you're more likely to get kicked than thanked if you float around in these latitudes reading temperance lectures."

"Where did he bob up from?" Steel asked.

"Floated ashore, like a merman, straight out of the sea."

"Floated? You mean in a boat?"

"Boat nothing. He swam here. Fell overboard somewhere off Tao Tao and the steamer didn't stop, so he had to swim or drown."

Steel nodded, but whatever thoughts he had he kept them to himself.

Before the little party returned to the warship Pills promised to take a run ashore next morning, to see his patient, and he turned up immediately after dawn in his pajamas and a dressing-gown, the "Old Man" having given him just twenty minutes grace, as he had decided to sail almost immediately. Pills brought a bundle of newspapers which were of comparatively recent date, having been passed on to the *Petrel* by a steamer not long out of Sydney.

Keith's fever was somewhat allayed.

"He may be all right now, if you look after him carefully," the doctor declared. "I've brought you a couple of bottles of medicine that should help him a bit. Good-bye. Awfully sorry I can't stop any longer, but if I don't scoot now there'll be a shindy."

A minute later he was flying down the path, with his dressing-gown blowing in the breeze. There came a farewell toot on the siren of the *Petrel*, and soon she was disappearing, away to the south, leaving only a long black trail of smoke behind.

But Keith's rally had only been temporary. Within a few hours his temperature was soaring. Death was knocking at his very door. Joan fought for his life as well as she could, but under such primitive conditions there was not much that she could do.

"Chester, have you — have you ever seen a man die of malaria?" she asked her brother tremulously, when Keith was worse than ever.

"Why, no — that is I've never seen a man die of fever," he replied, "though they do die sometimes, you know."

"I wish I had seen it," the girl declared. "Then I might know how much chance there is for — him."

Joan's delicate skin was ashen, and in her eyes there was a light which neither Chester nor any man had seen before. Chester stared at her, only half understanding. Something that he had never dreamed, never suspected, was beginning to dawn upon him.

Keith was lying still, moaning occasionally. His great frame seemed to have shrunk. His drawn face was a travesty of what it had been.

Chester looked down at the man and then at his sister.

"Are you scared — I mean are you really very much afraid that he might go?" he asked gently.

Joan did not answer in words, for words would not come to her just then. She shook her head, as though determined to oppose the very idea of Keith dying, but tears welled into her eyes.

Then Chester understood.

"He will take an awful lot of killing," he said, reassuringly. "A man with his constitution can look over the very brink and come back a dozen times. I wish now that I knew more about such things, but, honestly, sis, I believe you're more alarmed than is necessary."

Chester was not saying what he believed, but what he thought would comfort the girl.

Suddenly Keith, who had not spoken for hours, made a weak attempt to rise on to his elbow and fixed his burning eyes on an imaginary person in the room.

"Listen here," he said in hollow tones, moistening his parched lips with his tongue, "I tell you you're dead, Murdock. Can't you let a man alone for a while?"

Then he paused, as though listening to some reply.

"You belong in hell," he went on a few moments later. "Go back home, where I sent you. What's

that, Gibbs? Yes, I know we shall make a bum trip. It's rotten coal we've got in the bunkers. Australian always is. I don't believe we're doing more than seven knots at this minute, and the Lord have mercy on our souls if a typhoon strikes us. When I see the skipper I'll tell him — oh, yes, I keep forgetting he's a dead 'un. There he is again, curse him! Murdock, for the love of Mike, leave me in peace — ”

In a flash his manner changed. A look that might have been cunning came into his face.

“ I suppose,” he said slowly and with strange deliberation, “ I suppose it's those two pearls you're after, eh, Murdock? I know. I can read your mind. Yes, if it gives you any satisfaction to hear it, I've got 'em, but they're not for you. A pretty pair, they are, too. It's no use looking like that. You don't want pearls in hell, Murdock. Get out of this, or — ” his face lighted up with anger once more — “ or I'll crack your skull again.”

The paroxysm had burnt itself out. Keith sank back limp and shivering, with his eyes closed.

Chester, listening, had been biting his lips. He turned round slowly to his sister with raised eyebrows, but Joan's gaze remained on the patient.

Chester drummed the ends of his fingers on the edge of a table.

“ That's — that's not what I should have expected of him,” he said at last to his sister, in a low voice.

"Expected! What do you mean?" the girl asked.

Chester jerked his head in the direction of the patient.

"You heard what he said."

"But, Chester," the girl expostulated, "he is delirious. You don't mean that you suspect —"

"I hate to say it, my dear girl, especially when he's down and out, but it looks to me as though he'd let the cat out of the bag unconsciously."

"But think, Chester! You know him well enough to be sure he couldn't do a thing like that —"

"I know it isn't the sort of thing I should have expected of him," the planter said a trifle more bitterly, "but I know I didn't remove the pearls, and you didn't. There were three human beings on the face of the earth who knew where the *cache* was, and Keith was the third. Even supposing a nigger had known the pearls were in that room, the hole in the beam was covered so carefully that he might have hunted all day there without getting them. I didn't like to suspect Keith before, but now I have heard it from his own lips there's no alternative."

"I am sure — perfectly convinced — you are wrong," Joan declared obstinately. "At least you must remember that he was delirious when he said

it, and no man should be held accountable for what he says at such times."

"I'm sorry," her brother said, "but under the circumstances I am bound to believe the evidence of my own eyes and ears."

Joan opened her lips to reply, but did not speak. It was obvious even to her that Chester's point of view was an eminently logical one, one which it was impossible for her to combat with mere words. And yet she felt certain there was some explanation that would be forthcoming.

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE END OF THE ROPE

BETWEEN periods of extreme weakness, when life barely flickered within the man from the *Four Winds*, he spoke incoherently of many things, as his tortured brain jumped from one vivid moment in his past to another. There were times when he referred to a girl with strange greenish eyes. Sometimes he addressed her directly, as Eileen; but it was not in the language of love that he spoke . . . rather was it as a youngster in his teens might banter with a girl. Once he adopted quite a fatherly tone toward Eileen. Joan was sitting by his bedside. Keith was addressing an imaginary figure at the foot of the bed.

"I've often thought of you," he said seriously. "Lord, it's many a year since you and I used to have good times together. 'Member that day in the orchard when you fed me with cherries, and you fought like a cat as soon as I tried to kiss you? I'd just got back from my first voyage, and you'd switched over to some other fellow. I can't remember his name though. Did you ever marry him? Didn't you, really? Stop laughing." Keith

was smiling now. "You always did take everything as a joke. Oh, yes, I remember now, you did marry him, but you didn't last long. Pneumonia, or something of the kind, they told me."

The man ceased talking abruptly, and Joan drew the coverlet up a little higher over him. To stay there and listen to such intimate memories seemed to her terribly like eavesdropping, but she could not leave him unattended. During her long vigil, though, Joan obtained a certain degree of satisfaction in reflecting that it was some other man the girl with the greenish eyes had married.

Then, at times, Keith spoke more or less rationally about pearls, and particularly about the two large pearls. On one such occasion Joan was lying down in her own room, Chester having relieved her at her post. Keith spoke to himself rather than to some third person.

"They're worth a good deal," he was saying. "Funny thing to me that Trent didn't get any more like 'em, but they'd fetch enough to keep a man out of trouble for a while."

Chester leaned forward curiously. He had searched in every nook and corner of the house, including that room, for the missing pearls, without success, and had come to the conclusion that after removing them from the hole in the beam Keith must have deposited them somewhere out of doors.

"Where did you put them?" Chester asked deliberately, hoping the sick man, taken off his guard, might give away the secret of their hiding-place. Keith, however, took no notice.

"Where did you put those pearls?" Chester persisted.

For a moment or two the sailor's mind was clearer.

"Put what?" he asked, looking surprised.

"The pearls you took out of the beam?" Chester said, slowly.

A cunning smile spread over the sick man's face.

"That's what Murdock would like to know," he replied. "Lots of people want to know that. I can't tell you, though. It's a secret, see?"

Chester's face darkened. There was no shred of doubt now that it was Keith who had taken the pearls — his pearls, practically the only fruit he had reaped after all his expense and labour at the reef. It was maddening to have a semi-conscious man taunt him about it, but he could press the matter no further, for Keith's mind wandered off to other subjects.

The change came at dawn two days later. Keith had lain at death's door all night. Fearing the end was approaching, Joan and her brother had taken turns by his side. Twice the girl thought he had ceased to breathe. And then came the great sweat. Not long after that Keith was sleeping, peacefully

as a child, and the girl knew that his life had been spared.

Chester Trent made no reference to the subject of the pearls for a few days, until Keith, who made a rapid recovery, was fast becoming his old self again. The planter waited until one afternoon when he and Keith were sitting on the veranda smoking, while Joan was busy with needlework. Chester purposely chose a moment when his sister was there to broach the subject, so that whatever was said should be said in her presence.

"By the way, Keith," he began, biting hard on the end of a cigar, and fixing his eyes on the sailor, "what do you know about those pearls we hid in my bedroom?"

"Why, as I told you before," Keith replied, gazing out unconcernedly over the vast expanse of ocean, "in my opinion they're not anything very special, but they ought to fetch a good price if you can get them to the right market."

His eyes had never left the course of a far distant gull as he spoke, and there was not the slightest hesitation in his manner. Joan had let her sewing fall to her lap and had awaited his reply with undisguised interest.

For more than one reason it was not easy for Chester to frame his next question. There was a momentary pause. Keith left the gull to pursue its lonely course unobserved, and glanced round.

Both Chester and Joan were looking intently at him. Some instinct seemed to tell him that everything was not as it should be.

"What's wrong?" he asked quickly.

"Let me tell him, Chester," said the girl. "Mr. Keith, someone has taken them away."

"Stolen them?" Keith ejaculated.

"They've disappeared, anyway," put in Chester. Keith rose to his feet with a puzzled expression.

"Why — let me see — " he began.

He swung round, and entering the bungalow, made for the planter's room, striding straight to the beam where the *cache* had been. Chester was at his heels.

"I took them, Trent," said Keith bluntly. "I remember now. It seems weeks ago — anyhow I only remember it in a hazy kind of way."

"I know you did," replied Chester.

"When was it?"

"The day the officers came from the *Petrel*."

"How did you know I took them?"

"You and I put a little wedge in the beam, and inked it on one side, you remember, so that it would not show; I found that wedge on your bedroom floor."

Keith nodded.

"I must have dropped it there," he said.

"Besides that, while you were delirious you spoke

several times of having taken them. Where are they?"

"I don't know," replied the man from the *Four Winds*, slowly. "It happened when the fever had a grip on me. I fancy I had an idea — yes, I'm sure I had — that someone was going to take the things. You know what silly notions you get into your head when the malaria is biting you. Now, what in thunder — yes, I left you all on the veranda, to get some quinine, and I've a dreamy sort of recollection of trying to get that wedge out with my nails —"

"Yes, yes," said Chester anxiously. "What did you do then?"

"Trent, I'm damned if I know," the sailor replied frankly. "Maybe it'll come to me, but at present I can't remember another thing about it. I only know I was full of the idea that they were going to be stolen, and I thought I'd get ahead of the thief."

Joan had followed her brother into the room and listened intently to every word.

"You were talking to the ship's doctor after that," she said. "Do you think you gave them to him?"

Keith shook his head.

"No. In the first place he would probably have said something to you about it if I had, and in the

second place I do know I was obsessed with the thought that I must protect them somehow. Of course, there's no telling what a man who isn't in his right mind might do, but I should think the last thing that I was likely to do under the circumstances was to give them away."

"It was . . . unfortunate," commented the planter.

"It was . . . very unfortunate, Trent," Keith replied, with a square look into the other man's eyes. "They're bound to turn up, though, when we make a thorough search."

"I've been through the place with a fine-toothed comb," Chester said. "There isn't the least trace of them anywhere."

Keith was already ransacking his pockets in vain.

"Unless I threw them away, which I can't conceive possible, they must be somewhere," he said. "Now leave me alone for a while. I'm going to look for them my own way."

For two hours he hunted in every part of the bungalow where it would have been possible for two such small objects to be secreted. Considering his own room to be the most likely hunting ground, he first rummaged into every crack in the walls, floor and ceiling there. Then he subjected each of the other rooms to a similar scrutiny until, finally, he had to confess himself beaten.

"It's no good," he said to the planter. "They're

gone, and it begins to look to me as though there was precious little hope of ever seeing the things again. We reckoned they were worth fully two thousand dollars, and from now on I shall consider myself in debt to you for that amount, though as far as I can judge from my present finances, it'll be some considerable time before you're paid."

"Don't look at it in that way, please," said Chester, "though it's true they were my sheet anchor — my last hope. There's only the *Kestrel* left now, and if I sold her we should be utterly stranded."

"It is possible," said Joan, "that they might yet turn up — hidden away in some totally unexpected place. You know how things are found sometimes in the most unlikely corners."

"It's possible," agreed Chester, with an attempt to be civil in trying circumstances "but it doesn't sound to me likely."

Keith shook his head.

"I'm afraid," he said, "very much afraid, that's the end of them. I have a dim sort of notion — so dim that it is more than likely to be imagination — that I did something with them which put my mind at rest on the subject for the time. And as they're not in the house I might have hidden them out of doors, in which case the hunt would be hopeless."

"It couldn't have cropped up at a more inop-

portune moment," Chester said reflectively. "That chap Steel was perfectly willing to come into partnership with me, at least so far as the pearling was concerned. Anyway he was willing to make me a decent cash offer for all the pearls I had."

"It's no use my making apologies," said Keith. "I'd do a lot at this minute if I could restore the things to you, though even then it would be too late for you to fix up the partnership. I'm sorry, terribly sorry, Trent. My only excuse is that I hadn't the faintest notion of what I was doing."

Chester's feelings had passed through a variety of stages on the subject. First anger and disappointment, then suspicion, natural enough in the circumstances.

He walked over to the sailor and gave him a friendly pat on the back.

"Keith, think no more about it," he said; and the subject was dropped.

During the last week or so operations on the plantation had been carried out as a mere form of routine. The blacks had dozed and idled over their work, with no driving force behind them, especially while Keith was ill, and Chester appeared to be losing interest in the place altogether, though that was largely because his mind was fully occupied with the problem of how he was to carry on at all. Joan tried gently to stir up renewed enthusiasm in him, but was not very successful.

"I feel I'm in a regular hole, sis," he declared, "and there's no way out of it as far as I can see. To go on with the work on Tao Tao is almost like flogging a dead horse, but not quite, and that's the worst of it. If I had enough capital I'd sell this concern outright for whatever it would fetch and start all over again somewhere else, with a different kind of land."

"Well, well," said Joan, "we've made our bed and I suppose we shall have to lie in it. Don't you think, Chester, we could manage to scrape through for another year or so until the money begins to come in?"

"I've been wondering lately," the planter replied, "whether it would be possible for me to get some sort of an advance, to carry me over, from one of the big copra buyers in Manila, if I guaranteed to let them market my stuff. I know such things are done, and I could make Manila safely enough in the *Kestrel*, but even if I found a firm who would be willing to do business they wouldn't take my word about what we had on Tao Tao."

"Couldn't they send a representative down?"

"I expect they'd probably laugh at me if I suggested it," Chester said. "You see, it's such a deuce of a distance. I must churn that idea over, though. Something's got to be done, anyhow. We can't stay here and starve."

That night Chester Trent lay awake for hours

after the other occupants of the bungalow had gone to sleep. He felt that the position into which he had drifted was rapidly becoming desperate, and nothing remained but the trip to Manila. Long after he had arrived at that conclusion he continued to toss and turn in bed, for his brain was still active and wild cat schemes were chasing one another through it. Midnight had long passed when he rose restlessly and stared out of the window into the night. There was no moon, and even the tropic stars were dimmed by low-lying clouds. Everywhere there was deathly stillness, for the night breeze was too gentle even to cause a rustling among the leaves.

"Oh, my hat!" he exclaimed half aloud, and reached for a match with the intention of reading himself to sleep.

His fingers had barely closed on the box when the sound of many harsh voices struck his ears. It was an ominous, swelling chorus.

Chester's frame stiffened. For three seconds he held his head on one side in a listening attitude.

"God!" he muttered. "The niggers!"

Turning, he sped swiftly to the bed and pulled his revolver from under the pillow.

CHAPTER XX

THE ATTACK

A MOMENT later he had burst into his sister's room. The girl had already sprung out of bed, awakened by the cries of the blacks.

"What is it?" she cried anxiously.

"Get your gun, sis. There's trouble coming. They've surrounded the house, and, by the sound of them they're out for blood. On with a dressing gown. That's right."

"You there, Trent?"

It was Keith's voice. He was in the living-room. "Don't strike a light! Stick plenty of cartridges in your pockets, and give 'em lead."

"Best shove the shutters up at the back of the house," said Chester. "That may help — for a time, at least. Come on."

Hurriedly the two men swung across the bedroom windows the heavy boards which had always been ready in case of such necessity. These were fastened with solid bars, rendering the windows nearly as impervious to attack as the walls. At the front of the house there was one large window,

looking out on to the veranda, and here Chester and Keith stationed themselves.

A soft thud against the outside of the wall near Keith made him start back involuntarily.

"They're firing arrows," he said. "Don't expose yourself at the windows more than you can help or you may get hit with one of the rotten things."

"Joan, you'd better go into one of the other rooms," her brother ordered. "Ouch! Get back there!"

Another arrow, aimed in the darkness with better luck than the last, swished through the air within a foot of Chester's shoulder and its barbed point sank deep into the wall near where the girl was standing. They could not see the quivering object, but there was no mistaking what it was.

"You forget I can shoot as well as either of you," the girl replied in a voice that betrayed no sign of panic, "and if you think I'm going to take a back seat now you're mistaken."

It was no moment for argument. Moreover, what the girl said was true; and three armed people would be able to put up a better defence than two.

The cries of the blacks were swelling louder every moment as they worked themselves up into a frenzy for a massed attack. Already the yelping of some of the enemy, more adventurous than the rest, could be heard close to the house. It was impossible to

distinguish anything outside except the dim outline of the darkened sky against the still darker mass of trees.

"Do you suppose they are our own men?" Joan asked her brother.

"Don't know," he said. "Maybe it's a crowd Baloo and Isa have raked in from some other island — ah — !"

A shadowy form had appeared near the veranda and Chester shot at it three times in quick succession. There was a scream of pain, and at the sound of the shots there was a momentary lull in the roar of the attackers. Aiming blindly, Keith emptied his revolver into the darkness, and the other two followed suit. Over a dozen bullets swept across the cleared space, and more than one shrill note of agony from the throats of savages told that some of the lead had gone home.

A minute later there came the sound of thunderous blows on the walls at the back of the house, and Keith, leaving the other two to guard the front, slipped into his own room. A loop-hole had been bored near the window and from this he fired as fast as the trigger would work.

The attack in that quarter promptly subsided for a while. Chester and the girl were now firing furiously at the front of the house, and the sailor rushed to their assistance just in time to help in stemming an ugly rush. A dozen or more blacks had charged

up the veranda steps, only to be met with a wilting stream of lead. Keith's arrival was none too soon, however, for by the time he had crammed fresh cartridges into his weapon, several of the blacks were close up to the house and the revolvers that Chester and Joan were wielding were empty. The fusillade that Keith poured out was sufficient to turn the tide, and such of the blacks as had not been killed scrambled down into the compound.

"Are you both all right?" Keith asked sharply.

"I am, but look at Chester," the girl replied from her post at the window. "I think he got hurt then."

"I'll be there — with bells on — in half a minute," the planter said. "Something gave me a jolt on my shoulder. I think it must have been a club that was heaved at us. It made me see stars for a minute, though. Have they gone?"

"For the moment, but they'll be back," replied Keith. "There'll be things doing before we're through with this night's work. There they go behind the house again. Can you keep 'em off here while I go and attend to them?"

"I'll be all right," Chester said.

The pounding had become threatening. The men there were evidently trying to find a weak spot in which to break through while the attention of the defenders was fully occupied at the front. Keith returned to his loop-hole and winged one if not two

of the blacks. Then, hastily reloading, he once more emptied the magazine, scattering the shots in every direction. It was a haphazard form of marksmanship, for there was no guide to Keith beyond the shouting, but it had the effect of temporarily driving the men clear of that part of the compound. They soon returned to the attack, however, and this time used a heavy log as a battering ram on the side wall. There was no loop-hole or crevice in the building there, so they were able to pound away uninterruptedly, and soon the little building began to shake under the onslaught.

"They'll have the whole place down about our ears in another half hour," Keith said.

"Well, let 'em, the beasts!" Chester replied. "We can only go on plugging holes in 'em to the finish, and this looks to me very much like the beginning of our finish."

Even as he spoke he punctuated his words with an occasional shot into the darkness in the direction of a shadowy form which might have been imagination or might not.

"I wouldn't mind so much if it weren't so infernally dark," the planter went on. "It's rough on a fellow not to have enough light to die in decently if he's got to die fighting. I say, Keith, what worries me is —"

At that moment there was a faint flicker of the moon, the thin crescent of which struggled to cast

a pale glow through a break in the clouds down to the turbulent scene on Tao Tao. The glow took unawares a black who had stealthily climbed the steps and was crouching with a heavy club ready to hurl it through the window.

There came the crack of two revolvers almost simultaneously, and the black leaped into the air, spun round, and fell backward.

"What worries me," Chester went on between his teeth, "is Joan's fate. Once they break the side of the place down they'll be able to swarm in, and that's going to happen mighty soon now."

"I shall shoot myself when the time comes," Joan declared simply. "After all, one can only die once."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry to do that," Keith jerked out. "I've got an idea. Listen. As it is, we're trapped, and if we stay here the game will be up in a few minutes now. It's as dark as the grave outside. The niggers may have started by surrounding the bungalow, but if I'm not mistaken they're now all at the front and round at the west side where you can hear them yelling and thumping. The narrowest part of the compound is opposite Chester's bedroom. It's only about eight yards there from the wall of the house to the edge of the trees."

"That's right," agreed Chester. "If we could get her across there, there's a chance of making for

the Wilderness, or some other place, at least till daylight. Keith, you . . . you look after her, old man. I'll stop here and make a big noise while you're making your get-away. And, I say . . . Keith . . . see that she has one cartridge in her gun . . . for the finish. Now, for God's sake, get out of here, quick!"

The pounding had now doubled in intensity. Evidently the blacks, finding they could work there without interruption, had secured another log with which to batter the wall.

"I shall not go, leaving you here to be killed, Chester," the girl said firmly.

"Go, Joan," her brother urged. "There isn't a moment to lose. There's one chance in twenty for you if you clear out now —"

"You go and remove the shutter in Chester's room," the girl said, touching Keith's arm. "I will stay here with him helping to shoot and draw the attention of the blacks to the front of the house until you are ready for us. Then we all three go together or else I shall stay behind."

There was a crashing noise where the enemy were loosening the planks. Seconds had become priceless.

With infinite caution, Keith removed the shutter. It was pitch dark outside. He could neither see nor hear anything near. From the living-room the other two were discharging a volley.

"Come now," Keith said to them a moment later.

There was a wild yell of triumph from the eastern side of the bungalow as one of the battering rams burst through the wall. Keith climbed through the bedroom window and helped Joan down to the ground outside. Her brother leaped into the compound after them. They got half way across the clear space, moving swiftly and silently, when a black form, speeding as if shot from a catapult, cannoned into Keith, who was bowled over under the impact.

"Go on — go on!" he said hoarsely to his two companions. Chester and the girl, not knowing what was happening, went toward the shelter of the trees. Keith, meanwhile, had grappled with the black sprawling near him. To prevent the man from bellowing, the sailor had slid his great hands up to his opponent's neck and with thumbs of steel was fast reducing the squirming creature into a state of unconsciousness. His mind was wholly occupied with the grim task on which he was engaged, when there was the sound of scuffling near him and he knew that all was not well with his companions.

He had his knee firmly planted in the stomach of the black, who, however, was writhing desperately to escape the deadly clutch. It was sixty seconds, which seemed more like an eternity, before the form under Keith lay still and the victor began to relax his hold.

He was just preparing to jump to his feet when he became aware of the fact that another black was near. The sailor put his hand toward a knife in his belt when there came again a momentary pale gleam from the moon. Keith's hand had closed over the handle of the knife and he was within an instant of making a thrust with the blade.

"Marster Trent!" said a guttural voice.

"Who's that?" Keith asked suspiciously, delaying the blow which would have meant death to the black.

"Me Peter Pan," the voice added.

"Mr. Trent was here just now. Where he gone, eh?" Keith asked quickly.

"Come!" said the black, leading the way into the trees. The two men walked a little distance from the compound and then Peter Pan stopped abruptly.

"No can tell who dead," he declared. "Plenty heap big crowd niggers come on ship."

"Where's Mr. Trent? Where's Miss Joan?" Keith asked in a fever of apprehension. He had thought Peter Pan was leading him to them, but Peter Pan, knowing nothing of the fate of those two, had been taking the sailor away from immediate danger.

"No can tell," replied the black. "Plenty nigger kill you damn quick if you no stay here."

"I don't care," Keith replied wildly. "You stand by me, Peter Pan."

"You no go there," said Peter Pan deliberately. "Kill you, kill me. *Kai kai* both us."

Keith was realizing the utter hopelessness of his position. Never until that moment had he known how overwhelming was his love for Joan; and now, somewhere near him, in that bewildering blackness, she needed his help more than she had ever needed anything in her life. He strained his ears but could detect nothing save the frenzied shouts of the blacks as they surged round the bungalow. He would have called out to her, but feared that she might be hiding, as he was, and that the sound might attract a horde of the savages toward her. For his own life, at that moment, he had no concern. He would have died gladly had he thought that by drawing the attention of some of the blacks he would enable the girl to creep away. For a moment he stood still, staring into nothingness and racking his brain.

"I stop here," he said at length. "You go find Miss Joan. Then run back like hell and tell me. Savvy?"

Peter Pan grunted to indicate that he understood, and vanished silently as a shadow. It was maddening for Keith to stay there, impotent, hearing the sound of smashing woodwork at the house and listening, every nerve taut, for the cry of a woman's

voice, but he knew that he might serve her best by waiting until the friendly black returned with information as to her whereabouts. If Peter Pan could find out nothing it was probable that she had got away. If she were in the hands of the savages Keith felt that he could at least reach her side. There were two bullets still in his revolver. He had reserved them. It was better she should die that way.

The minutes dragged along like hours. Once there was a movement within a few feet of where Keith stood. He gripped his knife. Two or three men were there, chattering excitedly, but they did not discover the sailor, and moved off. Keith's nerves were of iron, but the strain was beginning to tell on him. He felt an almost irresistible impulse to rush forward and stab savagely at every form he encountered in his path.

"Marster Keith!" It was Peter Pan calling softly, ten feet away.

Keith answered with a hissing sound.

"Miss Joan she gone!" the black announced.

"Gone! Gone where?"

"Niggers all come along big Marster Moniz in schooner. Marster Trent he no here. Maybe he dead. Miss Joan she go along big Marster Moniz to schooner."

CHAPTER XXI

MONIZ SQUARES ACCOUNTS

THE arrival of His Majesty's gunboat *Petrel* in that part of the Sulu Sea was a particularly awkward event for Vasco Moniz. The Portuguese was a freebooter with no pretense of a conscience, a vagabond of the South Seas who had lived in a score of ways by trickery, robbery, extortionate trading and making illicit but highly profitable deals with the natives of various islands. He was a Pacific second-story man, differing from his city counterpart by the fact that he carried his life in his hands always, whether sleeping or waking, and that there was something of romance in his nomadic existence which appealed to his adventurous nature. But it was not only the vengeance or savagery of the black that Moniz had occasion to dread. From Singapore to Manila, from Timur even to Saigon, the centres where white men congregate were practically all barred to him. Moniz was a pariah, with the reputation of a thief — and worse. White men, by common consent, consider it the unforgiveable sin to supply firearms to the blacks in some places. A man sinks low before he sells trade gin

indiscriminately, for under its fiery influence natives may attempt anything; but an armful of rifles with ammunition which, even though it may have been condemned as rotten, is as likely to go off as not, may cause many a white man's head to be smoke-dried and hung as a proud trophy in an island canoe house.

It was typical of Vasco Moniz that he clung always to his own name out of sheer bravado, though the hands of so many of his fellow beings were against him. Wily as a fox, slippery as an eel, he was prepared to elude capture at any time, as he had done in the past. Crimes against the laws of communities and the laws of decency are soon allowed to slide into the limbo of the past in that strange, vast region south of the Philippines, unless the criminal has transgressed too far, and in that case there is no forgetfulness. It was gun-running to blacks in the Solomons which had placed Moniz beyond the pale, and more than one man, and a woman, would now have shot him on sight. But Moniz had lain low after the disastrous consequences of what he had done. Eight white men were killed and a ketch was looted by Locana natives bearing rifles which it was known Moniz had supplied to them. And Moniz was aware that the shackles threatened whenever a British warship hove in sight, and not merely on account of his gun-running operations either.

Always suspicious and alert, he was ready, when the grey hull of the *Petrel* hove in sight off Tamba, to learn that the wolves were on his track. He was on board the schooner, lying off the point where his bungalow stood, when the *Petrel's* pinnace shot from the gunboat's side. It passed close to the schooner, and was heading for the beach near his home.

"Hello, there!" he hailed, waving his pith helmet.

The pinnace lost way and swung round.

"Howdy," the lieutenant in charge replied; and then followed a brief battle of wits. One or two guarded questions concerning Tamba were put by the lieutenant, to which Moniz replied.

"Who's hanging out on the island now?" the lieutenant asked airily.

"One or two planters — there's a Swede named Svenk; there's Diaz; there was a chap called Angell, but he's gone west; and there's Vasco Moniz, a trader. His place is away on the other side."

The Portuguese watched the lieutenant as the latter stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"May I ask your name?" said the lieutenant in a suave tone.

"My name's Haskell," the Portuguese replied glibly. "I've got a bit of a shack right here. Anything I can do for you?"

"Why, no," said the lieutenant. "You say Moniz's place is at the other side of the island, eh?"

"Yes, on the westernmost peak. If you go round there, keep well clear of the reef."

"Aye, aye," shouted back the officer. "Much 'bliged."

Then he gave an order and the little craft sped back in the direction of its mother ship.

Moniz tugged at his moustache, aching to see the gunboat get under way. Soon her engines were throbbing. The moment the grey hull disappeared round the bend to the south, Moniz dropped into his small boat and, urging the crew on with words and blows, hurried to the shore. Even as he crossed the narrow stretch of water, he laughed aloud, for a thin mist was beginning to creep up from the north. Gossamerlike wisps of fog were drifting, spreading; Moniz knew that in half an hour they would form an impenetrable curtain. And it would not take him more than half an hour to accomplish the work he had to do.

Most of the stores he abandoned. Their value was inconsiderable. Anyway he regarded his neck as worth much more than their cost. But there were cases of canned goods, and a cache of ammunition and money. There was water on the schooner sufficient to last a week. Only one boat load did he dare to wait for, and the moment he drew alongside the schooner with that, he started bawling orders for the anchor to be heaved. Three minutes later, with her sails beginning to fill, she leaned

over to the breeze and turned toward the embrace of the fog.

As the first of the wisps of mist streamed along the side of the schooner the Portuguese chuckled. For he knew the gunboat would return to his bungalow soon, and would find the bird flown! Truly there were the elements of humour in the situation.

With a heaving deck under his feet, plenty to eat and drink on board, and a crew of cut-throats on whom he could rely to do his bidding, Moniz was not deeply concerned. He had been in worse straits than that before. It just made one more item on his balance sheet against the forces of civilization, and, he reflected grimly, might drive him to go a little further than he ever had done. Meanwhile his chief object was to keep out of the way of the interfering people on the warship. That, however, thanks to the start he had obtained in the mist, was easy; for a man who travels by sea leaves no footprints.

He kept on his northern course, beyond Tao Tao, for twenty-four hours without any very definite object in view, and then turned the schooner round. Two or three courses were open to him, but at any rate the Sulu Sea was now an unattractive neighborhood so far as he was concerned. There were possibilities along the coast of Borneo, but he had a fancy to strike southeast and try his luck among the countless islands off the coast of Australia. For

two more days he lay discreetly under bare poles, and then headed for the Celebes Sea.

Where the gunboat might be by now he had not the remotest idea, but the ocean is wide, and he knew there was as much chance of his running into the *Petrel* as there was of finding a needle in a bundle of hay. His course would take him back within a hundred miles or so of Tao Tao, and a queer smile played on his face at the thought of it. He had on board every man in his employment; and, besides, there were two kinky-haired refugees from Tao Tao. One of them had lost an eye. Both Isa and Baloo had a bitter grudge against the planter of Tao Tao, for did their backs not still bear traces of the flogging they had received under his orders?

Vasco Moniz was in the mood to attempt anything, but particularly would he like to square accounts with Trent and the big American sailor who had come between him and all his plans concerning Tao Tao. He lay smoking many cigarettes, with one eye on the sails and the other on the man at the wheel, but his thoughts were not of seamanship. One may as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat, and a dash of profit as well as the pleasure of revenge was possible in the project he was turning over in his mind. At last, with a wave of his arm, he summoned Isa to his side.

The diver grunted and an expression of wicked joy spread over his evil face as he listened to the

white man. Was not this exactly the sort of thing he had secretly longed for? The bribe of gin and tobacco, too, that Moniz was offering gave an additionally pleasurable tang to the notion.

A little later Moniz ordered the man at the wheel to alter the course of the schooner, and Isa, going forward, entered into a chattering council of war with Baloo, whose little pig-like eyes glittered in anticipation of what was to come. The rest of the crew were then informed of the coming raid, and, with undreamed of supplies of trade gin as a reward, their enthusiasm was unquestionable.

Moniz picked up the loom of the Tao Tao in the distance just as the blood-red sun dipped over the edge of the sea, and while the evening was still young he chuckled to himself, for fate was playing directly into his hands. All day the sky had been overcast. Now the clouds were gathering. A new moon should be hovering somewhere up above, but neither it nor the stars were visible. It was the sort of dark night he might have prayed for, had he known how to pray. With every light extinguished, and using the lead continually, he crept toward the island slowly. There was no hurry.

Not until after midnight was the anchor dropped quietly overboard, and then, after giving final instructions to Isa and Baloo, he ordered every man ashore.

First a silent, living ring was formed round the

Trents' bungalow, under the guidance of the two Tao Tao men, and then Isa turned to his most delicate task. None knew better than he that the blacks employed by the planter could be relied on to turn against him, almost to a man, if Taleile, the "boss boy," could first be got out of the way. Therefore he had a knife clutched in his hand as he crept toward the sleeping hut. At the door he paused for the space of twenty seconds, listening intently. Then with infinite caution, he passed into the stifling atmosphere of the hut. The men inside were breathing heavily, and some snored. One groaned, but it was not the groan of a man asleep. Presently he ceased to make any sound, and vague mutterings floated out into the silent night. Above these noises was the voice of Isa. As soon as the blacks learnt from him how matters stood there was no need to caution them into silence, and a few moments later every man — every one, that is, except him who had groaned — filed out in a sinister procession.

Moniz had taken up his position at the head of the path leading down to the beach. From where he stood there was every opportunity, in the event of the unexpected occurring, to beat a hurried retreat to the boat on the shore. When Isa reported to him, however, that the entire black crew of Tao Tao had joined his forces he had little doubt as to the outcome of the night's work.

It was his mind that had conceived the plan of

attack. It was from his brain that the suggestion came of battering down the blank wall with heavy logs. And when the heavy crashing of beam on wood reached his ears he knew that an hour of reckoning between him and the planter of Tao Tao had arrived.

His orders had been to kill both men if necessary, but he had declared that anyone who injured the girl was to forfeit his own life, while those who took her captive were to be specially rewarded. Loot was Moniz's chief object — loot, including the pearls which he knew well enough must be hidden away somewhere in the bungalow. If there was a good haul, so much the better. If there were not many they would at least recompense him for the trouble he was taking while passing the island. He had no particular desire to cause Trent's death, but there seemed little alternative. Keith he hoped would be killed anyway.

"Marster Moniz!" It was the voice of Isa near him in the darkness.

"Well, what name?" the Portuguese snapped.

"Um girl she plenty sick," the black announced.

"Sick eh! Carramba! If they have killed her! What about the two white fella?"

"Two white fella plenty ready for *kai kai*," Isa answered with a ready lie. The shots from the house had ceased, and if the white men had not already been killed Isa knew they could not face

such odds long and live. "Me kill one," he added, with a lively sense of favors to come.

"Fetch um girl along plenty damn quick," Moniz ordered.

The black disappeared, and a few minutes later returned with four men carrying the form of Joan Trent. The Portuguese stooped over her. The girl's heart was still beating.

"Fainted," he muttered. "You fella come along carry um girl down to boat," he added. "Isa, you go stop all um plenty fella knocking hell out of um bungalow, my word, or I come and be plenty angry along of them."

Moniz thought the best thing he could do was to wait until daylight, especially as he had the girl on his hands. His subtle brain had already conceived a plan for dealing with her.

When she opened her eyes Joan was on the deck of the schooner, and the Portuguese was on one knee at her side. She glanced up and saw his face in the light of a lantern. A shiver passed through her frame.

"I've got you now, *querida!*" Moniz said in a low voice.

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE SCHOONER'S DECK

“**W**HERE am I?” Joan asked with a catch in her breath as she glanced round.

“You are safe. Do not be afraid, little one,” the Portuguese replied, his teeth gleaming white in the rays of the lamp. “This is my ship. It is better to be late than never. It was only just in time, though, that I arrived with my men.”

Joan had regained her feet.

“What has happened?” she demanded imperiously.

“I fear you people of Tao Tao have been the victims of a rebellion,” Moniz declared smoothly. “It was by the merest chance that I happened to be sailing past and heard the shouting of the niggers. I went ashore with my men, and for a time I feared we, too, should be overpowered, but we managed to drive them off in the end. I regret that your brother and Mr. Keith were killed before we were able to rescue them. It was, however, for you, *querida*, that I fought, and though I received a slight wound I count it a pleasure to have earned it in such a cause.”

Joan was listening in silence. Her brother dead!

And Keith! The position was unthinkable. She remembered vividly the last few moments before she lost consciousness. Blacks had closed in on her and Chester. His revolver was empty but he struck out and there was the sound of heavy blows on flesh. There were two or three cartridges in her own weapon but she was afraid to pull the trigger lest in the darkness she should injure her brother. Then she heard Chester give a sharp cry of pain as he sank to the ground, and at the moment when she needed her strength more than ever before she fainted for the first time in her life.

All her old instinctive distrust for the Portuguese trader returned as she heard his story. She drew back from him as from a leper. That her brother and Keith were both dead might be, though Moniz's story of his heroic rescue did not ring true in her ears. Indeed, she was already more than half inclined to think that the trader had been at the bottom of the whole thing.

"What do you propose doing now?" she asked in an icy tone.

"Ah, that is for you to say," replied Moniz diplomatically. "I am your servant from now on, always, if you have it so. It may be that some time you will think less harshly of me after what I have had the pleasure of doing for you to-night —"

He drew nearer to her, but the girl held him off

with an arm which trembled in spite of her determination to be brave.

"If what you say is true," she declared frigidly, "it merely helps to straighten out the balance between you and me. Remember, on one of the last occasions I saw you, you were firing at an open boat in which you knew well enough I was sitting. There are white men on Tamba. Please take me there."

Moniz shrugged his shoulders.

"I think we should stay here, at any rate until it is light, dear one," he said. "There must be many things at your home which you would wish to save."

A haunting suspicion in Joan's mind suddenly began to take more definite shape.

"Such as what?" she asked.

"Your personal property," the man replied, "and — and there were, I believe, some pearls. They must be valuable, and probably you know where they were hidden."

There remained no room for doubt in her mind.

"Take me over to Tamba, immediately, please," she said. "I know nothing about the pearls you speak of."

"Ah dear one!" said Moniz coaxingly, again drawing near to her. "You have not much gratitude for me. It was freely enough that I risked my life to serve you."

Joan's back was against the schooner's rail; she could not recede further from him. She felt his hot breath on her cheeks and his arm stole round her shoulders in spite of her attempt to ward it off. She would at that moment have given ten years of her life to be handling the revolver which had dropped to the ground when she fainted.

Every nerve in her body was strung up to breaking point. The girl could have clawed at his face with her nails.

"I am unnerved — by what has happened," she said tremulously, still struggling to keep her face away from his lips which were seeking hers. "Stop! You beast!"

There came a slight jar against the side of the vessel — so slight that Moniz, his brain aflame, did not notice it. The girl was fighting mutely.

The form of a man appeared over the side of the schooner and shot across the deck. Joan was crushed against the rail, but what she saw brought a cry of joy to her lips.

For the man whose fingers were clutched savagely round Moniz's throat was Keith!

The Portuguese muttered a surprised oath, which ended in a choking sound, and attempted to swing round on his assailant. He was held, however, as in a steel trap. The four blacks who had returned to the schooner with Moniz were standing on the deck forward of the mainmast, watching the strug-

gle, calm though deeply interested; for the soul of your half-civilized South Sea islander is ever athirst for the sight of a regal battle. It was of no particular concern to them which of the two should prove the victor, unless there was any chance of the victor being weak enough at the finish to fall a prey to them, and there seemed to be every indication of something of the sort happening in this case.

Finding he was unable to squirm round and face his assailant, Moniz worked one hand toward his hip-pocket and managed to draw a gun from it. Instantly Keith seized the wrist of the Portuguese.

The girl, who had cast her eyes round hurriedly for some weapon, took hold of an iron bar and stepped near.

"Get back, Joan!" Keith shouted between his teeth, as he exerted every ounce of strength. "Keep off, or you'll be shot."

The girl obeyed, more because she feared to inflict injury on the wrong man than lest she should be hurt.

With a sudden twist of his great frame, Moniz turned, his chest now becoming pressed close to that of Keith, and they were locked in that position momentarily, each having an arm round the other's shoulder.

"Ah, it is you!" Moniz gasped, not without a queer sense of savage joy, for there was no man he would rather fight to a finish than the American

whom he had learnt to hate, though there were few who came nearer to matching his strength.

There was a pause in their movements. Each man, while holding on tightly as sinew and muscle could hold, was planning his own next move in the desperate game. Then, without warning, Keith feinted as though he were going to change his hold. Moniz moved his arm slightly and instantly Keith seized the advantage by tripping up the Portuguese. They fell heavily to the deck, Keith uppermost, but neither relaxed his fierce embrace.

Moniz still held the revolver in his right hand, and was straining to point the muzzle in the direction of the other man's body. Keith, with the assistance of one knee, pressed Moniz's hand upward until he could reach it with his teeth. With a growl of pain the Portuguese let the weapon fall, but, summoning all his strength for one great effort, he managed to unbalance Keith, and they rolled over and over on the deck, kicking, clutching, with fingers deeply imbedded in flesh. As they rolled Moniz felt the pressure of the revolver against his side. He manœuvred in such a way that the weapon came within his grasp once more. But though his fingers closed over it, his hand was imprisoned. Keith saw no chance of making the man drop the gun, and for a while they remained rigid until the Portuguese, exerting the enormous muscles of his neck, beat Keith in the face with the upper part of his fore-

head. Keith felt as though his nose must be broken. The pain was intense for the moment, and before he had time to recover from the shock Moniz succeeded in making a slight movement with the revolver, but the sailor's iron clasp reasserted itself.

The barrel was now wedged in between them. Keith was not certain whose body the bullet would enter if the revolver went off, but as far as he could tell it would be that of the Portuguese. He decided to risk everything on the hazard, and increased the pressure of his fingers over those of the man who was bent on killing him.

The weapon spat fire venomously. There was a scream of agony as Moniz relaxed his snake-like grip. With his arms waving, he struggled to his feet and tottered backward until he collided with the rail. There was a tense hush on the deck as he leaned over the side with a jerk. Then, in the dim light of the lantern, he disappeared into the water.

Neither Joan, who stood near, with her hands clutched to her breast, nor Keith, who had half raised himself from the deck and remained there panting, spoke a word for several seconds. The end of the conflict had come so suddenly and unexpectedly that it was difficult to realize it was over.

"Is — is he dead?" Joan asked at last, in a hushed voice.

Keith's muscles ached, and he became aware for

the first time that something was trickling down his face from a gash where his head had crashed against an iron stanchion. He rose painfully to his feet, and lurched toward the spot where Moniz had toppled over. Into the dark, swirling tide he peered, wiping a stream of blood from his eyes with the back of his hand as he did so. Everything was still save for the ripple of the water along the side of the vessel.

"Yes, I guess he's considerably dead," Keith said, turning toward the girl, whose white face showed up plainly in the half light. "Hadn't — hadn't we better get ashore now?"

He was still dazed after his terrific exertion, but when he saw the revolver lying on the deck he stooped and picked it up.

"I don't know," the girl said. "Is it safe there? I don't know what happened. Moniz brought me here while I was fainting or something. He told me you and Chester had both been killed and — and it had all been so dreadful on the island that I feared it might be true. Where is Chester?"

Keith shook his head.

"I have no idea, Joan," he replied slowly. "Anything may have occurred. I can hardly believe my senses which tell me that you and I are together now; but we are not out of the wood yet, by a mile. You know just as much about your brother as I do this present minute, but I fear they've

got him. I happened to run up against Peter Pan and he told me that you had been carried off. I sent him to find out what had happened to Chester and help him if he could in any way, and then I came here in the whale-boat. It was half afloat, otherwise I'm afraid I should never have been able to get the heavy thing off."

"Hadn't we better wait here for Moniz's men to come back to the schooner?"

"Why?" Keith asked in astonishment.

"Moniz said he took them on to the island to help us," the girl replied. "If that is so—"

"I'd like to wager my chance of ever seeing the portals of heaven that the whole thing would never have happened if Moniz had been where he is now," Keith said. "No, his niggers will be out of hand now, and I don't like the idea of your being here when they return. We could get across to the ketch in the whale-boat, and if necessary slip the anchor; but I'm not going to do that until I know definitely what has happened to Chester. It will begin to get light very soon now, so we must make for the shore before they can spot us. After that we shall have to take things as we find 'em, I'm afraid. I'll put you on the *Kestrel* if you like, but honestly I don't recommend it."

"Let us go ashore," the girl agreed quietly.

Keith found the cumbrous boat all he could manage, for an unusually heavy tide was now running

at its swiftest. The boat drifted a quarter of a mile down the shore before he managed to run the keel on the sand.

Dawn had begun to show in the eastern sky. Keith jumped over the gunwale and held out his arms to help Joan. The girl was standing up, ready to follow, but when she had placed her hands on his shoulders she let them lie there and made no move.

"This is the second time you have saved my life," she said softly and gravely. "My debt of gratitude was already so great, before to-night, that there seemed no chance of ever paying it, and now —"

"And now?" he repeated unsteadily, moved by the touch of her hands and by the pale beauty of her face in the first light of dawn.

"Now I know that I never can," she ended. Perhaps she guessed the struggle that Keith was engaged in, caught a warning from the hunger in his eyes, for she would have withdrawn her hands had he let her. But his own closed down on them and held them where they were.

"Joan," he muttered hoarsely. "Joan!"

Her gaze wavered and fell. There was silence for a long moment while the first golden pencil of sunlight shot across the water. Then swiftly his arms went about her and she was lifted clear of the boat and held tightly while his face bent close to hers.

“Joan!” he whispered again. “I oughtn’t to, dear! I mustn’t! I — God help me, I’m going to!”

He pressed his lips to hers, once — twice, and felt the kiss returned, and caught the little sigh as the form in his arms relaxed.

“My dear!” he murmured, and drew her more tightly to him until, on the instant, there came a gasp of alarm from her and, following the direction of her startled gaze, he saw a new danger confronting them.

CHAPTER XXIII

LOVE AT DAWN

RUNNING down the beach were a number of blacks.

Keith sprang across the sand to the low scrub beyond, and not until they were concealed behind it did he release Joan. It seemed that they had reached cover without being observed, while they had the natives in plain sight.

"It must be the men off the schooner," said Keith. "They're running their boat down to the water. Goodness only knows what has happened on this island during the last hour or two, though!"

"I'm afraid the bungalow is in ruins, anyway," Joan added sorrowfully. "See, they are not all going off in the boat!"

"No. There'll be two loads of them," replied Keith.

Then there fell a strange silence between them as they watched. The second load of blacks included the last of Moniz's ruffians. Cries came across the water from the schooner. Some dispute, evidently attended by violence, was in progress. Though those on Tao Tao never knew it, Baloo was mak-

ing a brief bid for authority until his interest in all earthly matters suddenly ceased, at the hands of Isa.

Keith was now watching in an agony of apprehension which he dared not put into words.

"God!" he muttered fervently at last, as the schooner's fluttering sails bellied and she stood out to sea. "I felt sure they were going to—" His voice trailed off as he met the girl's glance.

"Going to do what?" Joan asked.

"Going to have a picnic on our ketch to finish with," said Keith. "If the brutes had smashed her up that would have been the last straw. But they're too excited about something. Probably now that Moniz is dead they're hurrying to his place. They know there's a store of gin to loot there. Joan, we're going right up to the bungalow now. Keep your eyes very wide open, and shoot if a nigger even bats an eyelash at you, because they'll be all up in the air after last night's performance. I hope your brother is safe, dear, but I'm awfully afraid they got him."

They walked on the beach as far as the path leading up to the bungalow, without seeing anything of the blacks.

"Keep close to me," Keith urged as he stalked boldly ahead by the side of the trees. He stopped abruptly half way between the beach and the house.

"What name!" he called loudly, addressing a

head that had vanished among some bushes a dozen yards away. There was no response, and after calling again Keith twice discharged his revolver into the bushes before going further up the path.

There was no sign of life near as they crossed the compound, but it needed no second glance to see that the blacks had played havoc with the contents of the building. Chairs, boxes and clothes were strewn over the veranda, and a great deal of the furniture had been smashed with that abandon of which only savages can be capable.

Joan touched a broken candle stick with her foot. It was one which had stood on Keith's bureau. A bit of candle out of it lay near. She picked it up dumbly and handed it to the man at her side. Slowly then she walked up the steps and entered the house, stepping over the debris. It was heartbreaking from a woman's point of view to see the place that she had called home for four years reduced to such wreckage.

"It may have been foolish, but somehow — somehow I half expected to find Chester here," Joan said sadly.

Making a megaphone of his hands, Keith shouted at the top of his lungs from the veranda for the girl's brother, but no response came.

"See if you can muster some of the blacks with the gong," Joan suggested.

Keith was about to do so, and had the gong stick

in his hand, when a black at the edge of the compound attracted his attention. It was Peter Pan, and Keith beckoned him.

"Big Marster Trent he plenty too much sick," the man announced.

"Where is he?" asked Joan quickly.

Peter Pan pointed away to the east.

"Come on," said Keith to the girl; and they left their desolated home, Peter Pan leading the way. For a hundred yards he walked through the groves and then struck off into a patch of rough ground which remained in its virgin state. There, just within a fringe of bushes, lay the planter. For a moment the girl feared he was dead, and fell on her knees by his side, but to her joy he moved his lips.

"Water!" he murmured.

Keith picked the man up in his arms gently.

"Let's get back to the house," he said. "We can't do anything here."

Chester was no light weight, but the sailor never faltered under his burden until he had deposited the planter on what remained of his bed. There was a large abrasion on the side of his head, where a heavy blow had been struck, and his hair was matted. After holding a glass of water to her brother's lips and having the satisfaction of seeing him drink a little, Joan bathed the wound. Soon after the patient opened his eyes. After looking at them both

he smiled faintly in spite of his pain and weakness.

"What's happened?" he asked in a whisper.

"One or two things," replied Keith evasively.

"You lie still, old son. You're a sick man."

"Am I?" Chester said wearily; and a few moments later he fell asleep.

Going into the kitchen Joan was astonished to find Maromi standing bewildered among the wreckage.

"You clear up here plenty soon," she said.

The black rolled his eyes, as though wondering whether order could ever be created out of such chaos, but he began by setting the kitchen table on its legs; and then, settling down to his task, the house boy made strange noises, which he doubtless understood to be singing. Clearly, so far as he was concerned, it was a matter for rejoicing that the family had come home again.

With the assistance of Peter Pan, Keith straightened the furniture, threw into a pile all the things that were hopelessly broken, and, after a full hour's work, made the place look less like a ruin. One of the first things he did was to see whether the store had been ransacked, and to his great surprise he found the place intact. It was a large cupboard, forming the division between the kitchen and the living room, and in the darkness the blacks had evidently failed to grasp the topography of the place. Incidentally the fact that it had not been sacked was circumstantial evidence that Maromi had

taken no part in the wrecking of the bungalow, for of all the black crew on the island, he was the only man who knew where the stores were kept.

During this time Keith and the girl kept a constant eye among the trees beyond the compound, but no further demonstration was made by the blacks. Peter Pan was closely cross-examined as to what part the plantation labourers had taken in the affair, and he told of the manner in which Taleile had been murdered. As far as Keith could make out from the house boy's story, the plantation hands had run riot almost to a man, as soon as the attack started. Maromi, however, had remained loyal, and had even endeavoured to enter the bungalow in the darkness but gave up the attempt after being shot at several times.

When Chester awoke he had a splitting headache and complained of severe bruises on his side and leg, but no bones were broken. He explained briefly that when he and Joan reached the edge of the compound he was struck on the head and became unconscious. He had an indistinct recollection of crawling away afterwards through a world that seemed to be filled with shooting stars, and that was all he remembered.

"See if you can get the gang back on their job, Keith," he said. "If we don't take a grip on them now there may be the devil to pay soon. They're all probably hiding, scared of what's coming to them."

Keith sounded the great gong noisily. For at least a mile in either direction it broke the silence. Under ordinary circumstances that would have fetched the men at a jog trot to the clearing near their sleeping hut, which was visible from the veranda. But not a solitary figure appeared.

"There's no doubt they're around, somewhere," Keith said to Joan.

"Let Peter Pan go and talk to them," the girl suggested.

The sailor turned to the black, who was squatting on the steps.

"You go tell um niggers to round up plenty quick," Keith said. "Tell um big Marster Trent he angry along of um and if they don't start work one time he tell gunboat to blow um up, my word!"

Peter Pan grimaced, nodded and ambled away, delighted at the distinction of having been chosen to bear such a pleasing message. Keith and the girl remained on the veranda, troubled but hopeful. This was the last card they could play. If it failed nothing remained but to clear out on the *Kestrel* to seek reinforcements, for if the blacks were still to maintain a belligerent state the position of the white residents of Tao Tao would be impossible.

Presently, however, two or three natives skulked on to the parade ground, and others, doubtful of the consequences of disobedience, followed suit. When they had all assembled Keith stalked among them.

He glared round, a revolver in each hand, filled with righteous indignation. His knowledge of *beche de mer* was fully equal to that of Chester, and by long experience he knew how to mingle with it biting, stinging words such as penetrate into the skull of a South Sea islander. It was well that Joan could not hear all that he said, for he used the language a ship's officer would employ to a crowd of island greenhorns afloat. He made no appeal to their loyalty, for that would have been a waste of words. It was fear that he was instilling into them — fear of the determined white man, fear of the white man's lash, fear of the white man's power of revenge that could come with an ear-splitting shriek and explosion from a war-ship. There were men there who had tasted the terror of a bombardment as a form of punishment for murder, and those who had not tasted it had heard it described, the story losing nothing in the telling. The blacks listened with expressionless faces. It was not their way to display emotion. But they were afraid, so far as it was possible for their natures to feel fear. At least they were willing to assume the appearance of being obedient if by so doing they could avoid death, and Keith knew them well enough to be aware that was all he could hope for. Then, as a salutary measure, he informed them that they would each be deprived of half of one year's pay. He made a "boss boy" of Utanga, a native who had on occasion acted as

temporary overseer, and dismissed the awed crowd with instructions to settle down to work immediately.

"Good man!" said Chester when he heard what had been done. "One way and another, things seem to be petering out on Tao Tao, and at the present moment I don't think I'd recommend my bitterest enemy to buy the place as a going concern, but I will be up and doing soon, and maybe it will be possible to pull things together again."

"You've got to sit tight and get your head mended, before you even remember you're a planter," said Keith good-naturedly.

There were still a hundred things to be done about the house, and Keith attacked the work vehemently, but he was abstracted through it all, and although when Joan offered him a helping hand, he accepted her assistance smilingly enough, it seemed to her that he tried to avoid speech with her. This was not the man to whom she had clung during those precious moments on the beach but a few hours before, she thought. There he had been tempestuous, overwhelming. He had hurt her as he crushed her to him, and she had loved him the more for it. His present behaviour puzzled and wounded her. With a woman's natural longing to share the knowledge of her love with some one, Joan would have flown to Chester, had she not begun to doubt the return of her passion.

Could it be that he had acted purely on the impulse

— that it had been but the semblance of love, which he had allowed to show itself for a moment and then regretted? She was coiling her hair in two ropes, and studied her face closely in the glass. Scant though her toilet had been, perforce, Joan knew she was beautiful, and never had the knowledge given her greater joy than it did now. But she was sorely puzzled. If he had been a bashful type of person, that might have accounted for it somewhat, but nothing was further removed from Keith than bashfulness. He was strong in every sense of the word, determined without being inconsiderate, and unusually outspoken. A veil seemed to have been let down between them, and both Keith and the girl were conscious of it.

Soon after noon the sky became overcast. Dark clouds rolled up, and the sailor shook his head gravely as he looked out.

“Troubles never come singly,” he said to Joan, “and this is the season of the year when there’s liable to be a brute of a storm. I believe we’re in for something special in the way of weather.”

As he spoke there came a blinding flash which seemed to blaze its path round the walls of the house, and instantly it was followed by a crashing, tearing, rolling peal which sounded as though the very earth were being split asunder.

Maromi incontinently cast himself on his stomach in the kitchen, and continued to howl long after the

slender building had ceased to rattle and vibrate, for to him it was the voice of a god, angry and vindictive. Maromi's people had always known that when the sky god spoke as fiercely as that it was the coming of death, as a punishment, and so he knew, before the charred bodies of three black labourers were found afterwards, that the god had taken toll among those who had attacked the bungalow.

"That was terribly near," Joan said, unconsciously drawing closer to Keith as though for protection.

"It struck the niggers' hut," he exclaimed, pointing. "Look! The flames are already starting!"

CHAPTER XXIV

KEITH READS THE PAPER

THE hut was already a mass of flames which even the deluge of rain that followed did not extinguish for some time.

The first crash of thunder was only the forerunner of many. Several trees were struck not far from the bungalow. The din overhead became like one continuous roar of heavy artillery. And while the storm was at its height there came the thing which Keith feared most for his friends. A strong wind had been driving across Tao Tao, but it dropped, and a dead calm settled over the island. There was a curious yellowish flare in the western sky; an ominous foreboding hung about the still atmosphere.

First came the sound, the herald of an evil thing, not as a roar but in a high-pitched whine which rose higher as it neared them until it became a nerve-shattering scream as from the throats of a million souls in torment. Twice in his life Keith had heard the same thing in those latitudes, and though he knew what to expect he knew also that they were powerless. It was impossible for those in the

bungalow to hear one another speak. The girl cast a piteous look of appeal toward Keith, and he put a protecting arm round her.

Then the great wind swept over them. The house literally bent before the blast, and rocked on its foundations. Keith fully expected to see it lifted up bodily and hurled, lightly as an empty egg-shell, across the compound, but by some freakish chance the place was spared that fate. The inferno outside lasted several minutes, the rush of the hurricane being indistinguishable from the rattle of the thunder. At last it passed, leaving in its trail only the heavy electrical discharges and the torrential tropic rain.

"This just about settles things for me, I fancy," Chester declared between the crashes of thunder. "Two years' work, pretty nearly, must have been wiped out by that wind. I'll bet there isn't a tree left standing in the one-year and two-year patches."

Keith nodded lugubriously. He knew that not only the young trees must have suffered in such a tearing, sweeping onslaught.

"I wonder what the dickens ever made me come to this hole — and stay here when I'd arrived!" said the planter savagely. "Swollen head and obstinacy, I suppose! D'you know, I actually fancied I knew more about plantation work than that old nigger whom Isa murdered. Time after time he warned me the place was no good, but I couldn't

see it. However, we're evidently eternally busted now, Joan."

"You really think it would be no use staying on Tao Tao?" the girl asked with eyebrows raised.

"I'm sure of it," her brother replied. "It's been touch and go for some time, but there's no question about it now. In a way, I'm not sorry this has happened. I didn't seem to have the pluck to cut my losses and clear out so long as there was any reasonable chance of getting some of our money back. Now we're being pitchforked out of it, which relieves me of responsibility in trying to come to a decision."

"I think you're right — in fact I'm sure you are," Keith put in. "Practically you'd have to start all over again here, and as likely as not some time in the next two or three years the same thing would happen again. It seems to me your only problem is, what are you going to do? You've got the ketch. That's about your only real asset, but it's a home, of a kind, and travelling is cheap that way. Of course it isn't any of my business, but —"

"Don't be an ass, Keith," said Chester. "We're under no end of an obligation to you as it is, and I don't see how I'm ever to wipe that off. Suggestions are welcome. Fire ahead."

Keith puffed at his pipe in silence for a while, allowing a particularly vicious crash of thunder to spend itself and roll away into the distance.

"Let's get down to brass tacks, then," he said. "First of all, have you any place to go to?"

"The poor house!" Chester suggested with a grimace. "But I'm afraid we're too able-bodied to be eligible. We sold up everything when the guv'nor died and we left England."

"The *Kestrel* seems to me a fairly good boat in dirty weather."

"None better for her size," said Chester. "I've ridden out some bad gales in her."

"Well, how would you care to try trading for a while?"

"Trading! Why, I'd try it, but I haven't got a darned thing to trade with, and you know I'm no professional navigator."

"I know something about it, though," said Keith, "and if we make for Sydney we might find people there with whom we could negotiate for stock. It doesn't promise anything very brilliant in the way of cold cash, but if you have nothing better in view it would do to go on with."

"You're a brick to offer to come with us," said Chester. "We could make ends meet that way for a time, perhaps. What do you say, Joan? I'm afraid the life would be a bit rough for you, but if you found it so I dare say we could fix you up in Sydney till I have time to look round."

The girl faced the prospect bravely. All her hopes were crashing to the ground one after another.

"You mustn't let me enter into your plans," she said. "Do the best you can to straighten out the tangle. There are some cousins of ours living in Melbourne. If necessary I could go and stay with them temporarily."

"I'm sorry it's such a mess, Joan," her brother said. "I'll get on my financial feet again before long, though."

The devastating storm was at its worst during the first hour, but it continued intermittently throughout the day, and the rain fell almost in solid sheets during the following night, adding further ruin to the plantation. Next morning Keith left the bungalow to make a survey of the damage, and it did not take long to ascertain that their worst fears had been realized. The hurricane had torn a great path right across the island, levelling everything in its way, and the trees that had not actually been uprooted were so much damaged that nothing less than disaster had overtaken the planter of Tao Tao.

"My advice to you," Keith said to Chester on his return, "is to clear out of here, and forget you ever saw the place, the moment the storm subsides and you feel well enough to travel. The plantation is like the little boy's apple: there ain't going to be no core."

"Yes, I fancy I'm through; and I'm ready to travel as soon as we can get off. It'll take us a

couple of days, though. Then we'll beat it for Australia."

The ketch had dragged her anchor for two or three hundred feet, and only the fact that she had been lying under the shelter of the island had prevented her from disappearing altogether. Keith put off to her and found she had sustained some damage, but not more than he could repair. He spent a busy afternoon and then returned to the island for supper, reporting her ready for the journey.

That evening they were sitting in the living-room, a rather subdued trio. Chester's head was bandaged, but he had refused point blank to remain in bed any longer. He was smoking and ruminating. Joan was engaged in the prosaic occupation of darning. Her thoughts were a medley. Keith was turning over the bundle of newspapers which had been brought to Tao Tao from the *Petrel*, and which he had not had an opportunity of dipping into. Now, with nothing better to do, he smoothed out the stiff folds and, as was natural, turned first of all to the news of ships and shipping.

Suddenly he emitted a low whistle and laid his pipe down carefully. A paragraph with a small headline stood out in letters of fire before him.

His lips had become strangely dry. He moistened them, and read the paragraph over a second time, permitting every word to sink in.

Then he leaned back and laughed, in an odd fashion, for there was little of mirth in his laughter.

“What on earth —” exclaimed Chester.

“There’s — there’s been a — a kind of a misunderstanding,” said the man from the *Four Winds*, rising to his feet and casting a keen glance in the direction of Joan. There was something in his face that filled her with vague joy. For the first time since he had kissed her as they landed in the whale-boat the mask seemed to have been lifted from his face.

“It’s tickling you. Tell us,” Chester urged.

“Listen,” replied Keith. “‘The steamer *Four Winds*, which arrived at Sydney to-day, reports that her first mate, a man named Earle, disappeared in a mysterious fashion on the voyage. During his watch below, as the ship was passing through the Sulu Sea, he vanished, and no trace of him has since been found. The weather was calm which makes the affair more singular, since there was no possibility of his being washed overboard. It is supposed that he stumbled on the deck and fell over the rail. The officer of the watch, however, declares that he heard no cry. Captain Murdock, of the *Four Winds*, met with a serious accident the same night, falling in his cabin and sustaining a severe injury to his head, from which however, he is rapidly recovering. In view of the odd coincidence of the mate, having disappeared at the same time that the skip-

per received his injury, Captain Murdock placed the facts before the police on his arrival at Sydney, in order that any suspicion of his having been concerned in the fate of Earle might be removed. The police made a careful investigation, and after questioning the second mate, who was on the bridge at the time, and other members of the crew, they arrived at the conclusion that no blame whatever was attached to Captain Murdock.' ”

Joan had listened eagerly, her lips parted, her face blanched.

“ Well? ” she said almost in a whisper. The name Murdock still rang in her ears sometimes, as she recalled the terrible unconscious utterances of the fever-stricken patient.

“ Well? ” repeated Chester, no less moved, for though he had always been strongly drawn to this man who had sprung out of the sea, he had wondered vaguely what dark secret lay behind the sailor's sudden departure from his vessel — a departure which he had ever been singularly reluctant to discuss.

“ Nothing much, ” said Keith, picking up his pipe again and lighting it. “ Only that lets me out. I'm Earle, you see, and — I thought I'd killed him. ”

“ Murdered him, do you mean? ” said Chester with a frown.

Keith shook his head.

“ No, it wasn't as bad as that, though I'm afraid

if he had died a court of law would have called it that. Murdock found himself in a queer hole, though, through my disappearing. Many a man has been hanged on less evidence than what there was against him. I don't wonder he was anxious to have his position cleared up."

There was a brief pause. Then:

"And so your name's Earle," said Chester.

"Yes — Keith Earle. But you'll see in a minute that I had good reason for not saying too much about it. Murdock was a brute — the worst kind of Yankee skipper. There wasn't a man on board who wouldn't have been delighted to hear he'd broken his neck. And for some reason he had his knife into me particularly, probably because I lost my temper the first day we were out of New York, and told him frankly what I thought of him. For many a month things grew worse and worse. He tried to bully me, and, as I dare say you know, if a skipper wants to make it awkward for his chief officer he has a good many opportunities.

"The night I left the ship he was down in the cabin with me, long after midnight, and a row started — just one of the endless series. This time it was something about the handling of the men, and I didn't agree with him. I'm willing to drive men to the limit of their endurance, if necessary for the safety of the ship, but he wasn't happy unless they were being plain bullied. He riled me for fair

that night, and we had some pretty hard words. We both took the lid off our feelings, and right in the middle of the rumpus the skipper's steward happened to come into the cabin. The skipper heaved something at the man, who vanished, but not before he'd heard enough to know there was likely to be trouble between us.

"A minute or two afterwards Murdock made a bull rush at me. He wasn't much of a fighter, but he was nearly as strong as an elephant. He had his fist bunched up, and if he'd got it home I should have been laid out. It's a serious thing to scrap with a ship's captain afloat, and I had no idea he was going to start a rough house. But he was like a crazy man. There was no stopping him with words, so, in self-protection, I let him have it on the point of the chin.

"It wasn't much more than a tap, as blows go in fighting, but he lost his balance and toppled over, striking his head against a sharp corner.

"The moment it happened I saw there was trouble for me, because I guessed Murdock would lay it on as thickly as possible to get even, and he had the steward as a witness that there had been a row between the pair of us. I had no fancy for going to prison for protecting myself against the beast. Then it struck me that he looked horribly still, and I made a hasty examination of him. His head was split open, and his heart must have been beating

very feebly because I made sure it had stopped.

“That made me think hard. I reckoned I didn’t stand a dog’s chance of avoiding being strung up. It took me about sixty seconds to make up my mind, and then I slid over the stern. At least I knew I should stand a sporting chance in the water, because there were islands around there. You know what happened after that. I told you that my name was Keith, which was true, and said nothing of my other name for fear it would get about and they’d come after me. When that warship put in I made sure they’d got me.”

Chester arose and walked across to Keith with outstretched hand.

“I wouldn’t have blamed you in the circumstances if the other fellow had died,” he said, “but just the same I’m jolly glad the thing’s off your mind. I say, it must have been a bit of a load, eh? Sort of a nightmare, I fancy.”

Keith nodded thoughtfully as he placed his hand in that of Chester.

“Yes,” he replied gravely, “it was a nightmare.” His eyes sought Joan’s across the room, and: “It was all that,” he added, with conviction.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CANDLE GUTTERS

WITH tropic abruptness the storm had ceased. In a few minutes the night had changed from drear ugliness to sparkling beauty. The growing moon was riding like a toy lantern half way up in the heavens, lost amid the dazzling glitter of star-land. The splendour of the Southern Cross shone down on the island, and countless millions of other distant planets gleamed their brightest as though to make up for lost time. It was night in a faerie world. Even devastated Tao Tao was transformed once more into a thing of beauty. A cool, gentle breeze swayed the rain-laden leaves so that they resembled a mass of burnished silver set in a magic background. Stretching into the horizon, against the illimitable maze of stars, lay the restless sea, unruly now, and flaked with white foam which danced and cavorted in the gay glare of the starlight as the mighty swell rolled on, flicking the island gem as it passed. Nestling in a sheltered cove, at her usual anchorage, rode the *Kestrel*, pulling lightly at her cable like a restive horse eager to be off.

But it was not merely the wizardry of the night that held Keith in a spell as he stood on the veranda with Joan beside him and looked over the scene. The shackles had fallen from him. A millstone, that had weighed him down both sleeping and waking, however he strove to forget it, was there no longer. He was free — free to come or go, free to sail on the face of the sea in ships, free to stay where he was and say whatever his heart dictated to the woman of his choice.

Yet Keith, who had never known what nervousness was, had suddenly become acutely conscious of what the word could mean. For many weeks he had held himself in check when he was longing to declare his love. Then had come the moment when, after he had endured nameless horrors of apprehension, his resolution had failed him and the shadow had been forgotten for one long glorious moment. Afterward he had got himself in hand again, had drawn back when too late and, drawing back, had known that he was hurting Joan just as he was hurting himself.

“Joan, dear,” he said soberly, imprisoning the hand that hung beside him, “can you forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” she asked gently.

“I had fought so hard — before — not to let you see,” he went on, “and then — afterwards — I thought I could hide it again. And I did, but — it hurt!”

"Do you really think you did, Keith?" she asked dreamily.

"Why, yes! Didn't I, Joan? You don't mean that you knew all the time —"

Joan smiled, dared a glance at him and nodded.

"Not quite all the time: not just at first: but after a little, yes. You —" she laughed faintly — "you were rather clumsy — dear!"

Swiftly his arms went about her then, and he kissed her lips, her smooth cheeks and the starlit eyes, and murmured her name.

"Joan! My Joan!" he said tenderly. "I've loved you so long, dear, and have wanted you so much. When — when will you marry me, Joan? Need we wait very long, dear?"

For answer she placed a slender hand behind his head and drew it down until his lips rested again on hers. After a moment:

"Do you know, dear," she whispered, "what makes me almost as happy as anything is that your secret has gone. I have always believed you would tell me some day. Of course I did not know what it was; I have always known that the cloud was there though. It is hard for a man to hide sorrow from the girl who loves him. At first I thought sometimes that it was — was somebody else in your life, and then — then I didn't think so. For your sake I was often very unhappy. Sooner or later you would have told me everything."

"Yesterday and to-day," the man said musingly, "I have actually been thinking that perhaps I ought to go right out of your life and try to forget."

"Without saying why?"

"Yes."

"But you wouldn't have done it, dear man," the girl said smilingly. "No, Keith, you don't understand yourself half as well as I do."

"Your brother is not asleep yet," he said a minute or two later. "Let's go in and stagger him with the news."

With his arm round Joan's shoulder, Keith led her to Chester's room, where the planter was reading in bed.

"We —" they began in chorus, and then stopped, looking at one another and laughing.

Chester put down his book and smiled.

"By a process of logical reasoning," he said, glancing at the location of Keith's arm and seeing the happiness in their faces, "I should assume —"

"Go ahead and assume, old man," said Keith. "Joan and I have just been fixing up a kind of a new partnership."

"Old as the hills," said Chester. "I once did the same thing myself, but the lady changed her mind next morning, for which I was later devoutly thankful. But seriously, I'm awfully glad, Keith. I shall miss her frightfully, but these little things will happen, y'know."

"Miss nothing," rejoined Keith. "I thought we were all going off on a trading stunt."

"No, don't bid me a fond farewell yet, Chester. I'm not even married," Joan protested.

"With your permission, dear," said Keith, "that interesting event will take place as soon as we skip ashore at Australia. That is the star number on the programme. There are other things to think about, such as earning a living, but they'll take care of themselves."

Keith had no misgivings as to the future that night when he lay awake trying to realize his good fortune. He was still young, and could kick the world ahead of him. Never was buoyant lover more bereft of worldly possessions to lay at his lady's feet than he, but his brain was already alive with plans for the future.

"We can get away at this time to-morrow," said Chester at breakfast the following day. "There's a pile of work to do, so we must make things hum. There's no doubt we can hand our niggers over to the planters on Tamba. They'll be jolly glad of the chance to get them. I'll run over there in the ketch now and fix that up."

Joan and Keith spent the morning gathering together and packing such articles as were worth taking along, though most of the simple furniture they decided to leave behind because it had suffered at the hands of the blacks in the raid. While

handling their household goods both Keith and the girl kept a wary eye open for the possibility of running across the missing pearls, but without success.

"How quickly a home can become impersonal!" exclaimed Joan, as she surveyed the interior of the bungalow after it had been practically dismantled. "I wonder whether any one will ever live here again?"

"Shipwrecked sailors, perhaps," said Keith. "Good luck to them if they do come, but somehow I hope they won't take any notion into their heads to alter the old place, or add to it or anything."

"If it's any comfort to them they're welcome to do as they please, surely," commented the girl.

"As a matter of fact it's ten thousand to one that nobody will ever sleep under the roof again after to-night, and in the next few years it will crumble down, but I should like to think always of it as still there, so that if ever I were passing this part of the world I could just pop ashore and have a peep at the place where I met you."

Joan blushed prettily, and for a brief interval the operation of packing was definitely interrupted. Although the island had memories for her that were better forgotten, it was to remain in her memory always that her first meeting with Keith had been there.

Chester returned from Tamba late in the afternoon, reporting that he had made arrangements for

all the blacks employed by him, except his crew of Kanakas, to be taken over by the planters there, and he had promised to run them across the next day, before the *Kestrel* started on her trip for Sydney.

Everything except the barest necessities had been got ready for removal to the ketch. There was nothing very jovial about the trio as they ate their evening meal. Chester's spirits were a trifle artificial: for him the occasion was the end of all his hopes so far as Tao Tao was concerned, and the morrow, with a good many morrows to follow, was somewhat problematical. Joan, too, felt something of this, only the ordeal, for her, was softened by the knowledge that she and Keith loved one another. Whatever the problems of the morrows might be, she was content to leave them in his hands. Of the three, Keith had the least occasion for regrets.

After supper, the men discussed their plans and prospects, until it was growing dusk and Joan burst into a peal of merriment.

"I meant to leave out some candles," she said. "That crate you are sitting on, Keith, contains them all."

"Never mind. We'll go to bed early," he replied. "Meanwhile there's a bit of candle somewhere in my room. We can manage with that."

It was the piece of candle that Joan had picked up in the compound on the morning following the

raid by the blacks. Keith now stuck it on one of the crates, and for half an hour the trio weighed up the possibilities of the future. The question of ways and means was a serious one, and there were many questions with which Chester bombarded Keith.

"Well, beggars can't be choosers," the planter mused, "and we're in no position to dictate terms. We should have been stuck entirely but for your idea of getting someone in Sydney to give us a start. It's like working on borrowed capital, though, and that's always a great handicap. But needs must when the devil drives."

The candle was burning low. Another inch of it only remained, and the breeze through the open door and windows was causing it to gutter.

Suddenly, while thoughtfully poking the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe with his finger, Chester uttered an exclamation of amazement and thrust his head forward as he stared at the dwindling candle.

Gradually detaching itself from the half melted wax was a small round object. Chester put out his hand, but before he could reach the thing it had dropped on to the box and lay there.

"One of the missing pearls!" said Chester in a queer voice.

Picking up the stump of candle, he prodded into it with a match, and extracted another pearl from the soft substance.

"Well, I'm — well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Keith.

"Do you remember putting them there?" Chester asked.

"Not the ghost of a recollection," replied the sailor. "As I told you, though, I had a vague idea I'd put 'em somewhere safe."

"They were nearly too safe," the planter chuckled, taking the pearls in his fingers and polishing them lovingly with a handkerchief. "Now, who in the name of thunder would have thought of — I say, Keith, what sort of a place is Sydney for marketing pearls?"

"Pretty fair. I doubt whether there's a better outside the big cities in Europe or America."

"The saints be praised! These little things will make a rare difference in our position, because we can sell 'em and buy our goods for trading just where we please. We're going to do well, Keith. I'm not a superstitious blighter in the ordinary way, but I am in some things, and I'm willing to bet this is where my luck swings round again. God knows I've had a thin time lately, one way and another,— a regular landslide, as I was telling that chap Steel, off the gunboat. But even a landslide must come to an end sometime, and —"

"There goes the last of the candle," said Joan.

"By the way," said Chester, "it's a jolly good

thing you did hide those pearls, as it turns out, because, as sure as the Lord made little apples, if I'd been able to put my fingers on 'em the day the *Petrel* called here I should have sold them to Steel, and I shall get a far better price for the things in Sydney."

"On the other hand," said Keith, "you'd have been able to take on a partner in your pearling. Heaven only knows how that might have turned out."

"I wonder," mused Chester.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PEARL OF TAO TAO

NEVER had Tao Tao looked more perfect than in the golden dawn when, for the last time, Chester rang the great gong on the veranda, to assemble the blacks for their journey over to their new employers on the island of Tamba. The sun had barely made its appearance before the labourers were stowed, a solid mass of chattering humanity, on the deck of the *Kestrel*. The sea was by now almost calm again, and before a spanking breeze the ketch glided out over the blue water. Only Maromi and Peter Pan remained behind, to assist Keith and the girl in the removal of cases and bundles to the beach, ready for storing on the *Kestrel* when she returned. Chester had promised to be back before noon, and by the time the white sails of the vessel became visible again everything that was intended for the *Kestrel* had been piled on the beach.

“She’s coming along like a race horse. Another hour and she will be here,” said Joan, allowing her eyes to linger on familiar scenes for the last time.

Keith was squatting on the sand, cutting at a

plug of tobacco contentedly and poking the shreds into the bowl of his pipe.

"It's difficult to realize that we're going to quit," he said. "Do you know, I've gotten so used to the place that I believe I shall hate to go."

He had struck a match and was putting it near the tobacco when his eyes fell on a barrel twenty yards away. A puzzled frown flitted across his face. The match remained in midair, and the flame died.

"I don't believe Chester ever took the trouble to go through that last lot of shell he fetched from the reef," he said. "I'll go and see."

Joan walked over with him. The barrel was half full of oysters which were in perfect condition for working on.

"I don't like to be lazy," said the man. "You sit to windward and you'll never know they're here. I ought to get at least ten dollars' worth of seeds out of this lot."

Lying on the ground near was the tin can which they had always used for baling water over the shell as they searched, and Keith began to work, jesting with Joan as he did so. He had thrown away the contents of scores of oysters when his fingers encountered something hard and round. Anticipating that it was a pebble, he was preparing to flick it away with the blade of his knife after examining it, when he uttered a cry of surprise.

"What is it?" said Joan, rising and running toward him.

In the centre of his palm lay a pearl, twice the size of any that had yet been found near Tao Tao, and of faultless shape and lustre.

"It's — it's a great find!" said Keith slowly. "Joan, that little bit of a thing is worth as much as I should draw in wages as a mate in about two solid years. Dearest, wrap it up in your handkerchief. I'm going to go through the rest of this shell carefully."

"You surely don't expect to find another?"

"Who knows?" said Keith, busy once more. "It just occurs to me that this shell didn't come from the place where Chester has put in so much work. If you remember," he went on, clenching his pipe tightly between his teeth, a trick of his when he was keenly intent in what he was doing, "the last time Chester was after shell he tried the north-east side of the reef for the first time. The water is deeper there, and sometimes it's marvelous what a difference — Jumping Jerusalem! Here's another!" he shouted.

The ketch was now at her moorings, and the anchor went overboard with a splash, but Keith was too wrapped up in what he was doing to pay much attention to Chester's arrival. The second pearl, although not of the same size as the first, was a par-

ticularly beautiful specimen, which would, alone, have repaid them for weeks of toil.

When Chester landed he was met at the water's edge by his sister.

"Come, come," she said, grasping his hand and tugging him up the beach.

"Well, what is it?" Chester asked, laughing and running with Joan.

"Pearls!" the girl said excitedly, and then, remembering that she had the larger one stowed away in her handkerchief, stopped and displayed it to her brother.

Chester Trent's lips took on the shape of a figure "o," but he was too impressed to whistle.

"Two of them, there are," said Joan. "The other isn't quite as —"

She was interrupted by an excited cry from Keith, toward whom his companions raced.

"Darn me if there wasn't still another in the very last shell!" he said.

The latest "find" was fully equal to the one before.

"Now what d'you think of that for a day's haul?" asked the sailor with a broad smile.

"Why, Keith, old son, it's — it's wonderful." Chester was still in a daze as he looked at the gleaming pellets in his hand.

"Not a bit. It's just the luck of pearling. Shift

your ground a bit and you may fall right into 'em — as you have done, evidently."

Chester took off his pith helmet, ran his fingers through his hair and developed a comical expression.

"This sort of makes a difference in our plans," he said, looking from one to the other.

"You've got your divers on board still?" Keith asked.

Chester nodded. The same thought had inevitably occurred to him.

"And you know exactly where you found this last lot of shell?"

"Certainly, and there's plenty of time to have another shot there to-day."

Five minutes later the ketch was once more standing out toward the reef, with the whale-boat trailing astern. Joan, also, had now caught the pearl fever, and there was a strained intensity about the white members of the party when the *Kestrel* was anchored. For two hours hardly a word was spoken while shell was brought to the surface and examined with minute care. Evening was already beginning to approach when Chester gave a shout.

"Here's one," he cried, picking out a pearl from the heart of an oyster, "a pearl fit for a queen to wear! Keith, do you realize that we've struck a fortune?"

"Sure, there's a pile of money here, and I'd like to be the first to congratulate you."

"*Me!* You mean *us!* You've got to have your whack out of this, laddie. There's enough for all three of us. Joan and I would never have seen a penny back if it hadn't been for you."

"Well, money has its uses," said Keith, "but to tell you the truth, Chester, I'm thinking less about that just now than of an engagement I've got in Sydney." He looked meaningly toward Joan.

"Tell you what," said Chester. "Somebody has to run over to Sydney with all these pearls, but wild horses wouldn't tear me away from this reef for the present. I'm going to settle down on Tao Tao like a lonely hermit for a while. I can manage quite well with the whale-boat, if you two go off in the *Kestrel*. Put me ashore, and I'll look after myself till you come back, but don't be too long."

"I wish you would come, too, Chester," Joan pleaded.

"Sorry, sis," her brother replied firmly, "but Old Man Opportunity is knocking at our door as I've never heard him knock before. I'll soon have the bungalow fixed up again. There's not a thing to detain you, once you get your trunk on board."

Midnight was drawing near, however, before a sufficient degree of comfort had been re-established at the house to satisfy Joan, and then, after final instructions to Maromi concerning her brother's creature comforts in her absence, she announced her readiness to start.

"Good luck go with you," said Chester, as he went down with them to the star-lit beach. "Here are the pearls we've found to-day, Keith, and the seeds also. I leave the sale of 'em entirely to your discretion."

From a pocket he took a small wooden box with a metal clasp. This he handed to Joan.

"It's the best I can do for you as a wedding present, sis," he said. "Now be off, the pair of you, and come back making a noise like two bloated capitalists, because I hope to have hauled a lot of our wealth up by then."

Joan lifted the lid of the box. Nestling under a wad of cotton wool were the two pearls that had been lost and found again, the pearls that had inspired Chester to perseverance.

An ebony-hued Kanaka held the wheel and cast an occasional eye aloft at the taut sails. Forward, another black lay on the deck, head propped up on elbows, staring out over the limitless Pacific, and wondering what had happened to a brown-eyed girl far away whom he had promised to return to some day. That could not be for another season, because there was yet a full year for his contract with big Marster Trent to run. He marvelled vaguely at the freakish notions of white men in taking the *Kestrel* to the white man's country such a distance away. He understood that they would not be

back before another young moon had shown itself.

Dipping down, on the rim of the water, lay Tao Tao, only a vague blur now in the distance. Joan, with her heart beating a shade faster than usual, and held closely to Keith, watched the outline of the island grow dim.

"Are you happy, dear?" he asked her softly.

"I never thought there could be such happiness," she said. "It wasn't plantations or pearls or anything like that which brought me to the South Seas, Keith. It was to meet you that I came."

"And it was for a pearl that I came, dearest," said Keith. "The most wonderful pearl in all the world. The Pearl of Tao Tao."

Her lips were near. He glanced toward the helmsman.

At that instant the ebony-hued Kanaka was looking up at the sails.

THE END

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